

Chapter 1

26 year old Heather Williams stared at her stoop, feeling all of the color drain from her face. Never, in a million years, did she expect this moment to come.

Heather had thought today was going to be a normal day. She was going to go to work today, as a healer at St. Mungo's Hospital back in England. Then she would come home and write a letter to her best friend, Lily Potter. But according to her discovery on the stoop, she was not going to be doing any of these things today.

Slowly and shakily, Heather picked up the letter, reading and trying to comprehend it.

Dear Heather Williams, it read.

As you probably have realized, I'm truly sorry to say that James and Lily Potter were killed last night by Lord Voldemort. As James and Lily would have wanted, I have decided to separate the twins. Also, as what they had requested this, Jade will be given to you, for you to care for her until she is of age. Harry, however, will go to his Aunt and Uncle in Little Whinging, Surrey. I believe it will be very hard for Jade and Harry to meet when they live in different countries.

Heather, I know this will be very hard for you, but you must take care of Jade. It would have been what Lily wanted.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Heather gently put the letter on her table by the door, ignoring the tears flowing down her cheeks. She looked down at the basket holding the tiny baby girl.

The girl was adorable, with thick black hair and a round face. The baby was sound asleep, emotionally exhausted.

Heather sighed softly and picked the girl up from the basket. She smiled when the baby girl giggled softly. *'I guess this won't be so hard,'* Heather thought. Jade Potter, the twin sister of the Boy Who Lived, opened her eyes, revealing her dark hazel eyes.

Jade Potter opened her eyes, waking from her dreams.

Jade grimaced when she thought of Heather, her foster mother, who had been her best friend. She missed her soft voice and gentle brown eyes. Those same eyes that filled with tears when they showed Jade off at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

Jade glanced over at the seat in front of her, where Keira Braxton, Jade's best friend, slept. Keira was also a witch, whose parents were killed in a car accident back in the United States. After the funeral, it was revealed that Keira was to live with Heather and Jade, who were both more than happy to take her in.

Once Keira had gotten settled in Jade's home, Heather began teaching them magic, since Heather refused to send Jade to a school. *'I have no idea why she's sending me to Hogwarts now,'* Jade thought irritably.

Heather had given them a choice: she would make them go for one year, and they could choose whether or not they wanted to stay there. So far, Jade was confident that she would want to go back to being home-schooled.

Suddenly, the train came to an abrupt stop, waking Keira. "Are we there already?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"No, I don't think so," Jade replied, furrowing her eyebrows. She got to her feet and opened the compartment door. The light swiftly went out, plunging Jade and Keira into darkness.

"Jade?" Keira's voice called nervously.

"Don't worry," Jade reassured her, "I'm still here." She felt her way back to seat and plopped down.

After a couple minutes, the compartment door slowly opened, but Jade couldn't tell who or what it was.

Jade suddenly felt a terrible cold filled her heart and deep breathing filled her head, as if from a horror movie, pulsed through her head. Her eyes rolled back into her head and then, only darkness.

"Jade! Jade, come on! Wake up!" Jade heard a familiar voice yell in her ear.

Jade opened her eyes, a bright light blinding her. She groaned and put a hand up to her face. The next time she tried to open her eyes, the light wasn't so bad. "What happened?"

Keira, who was kneeling next to the seat that Jade was lying on, frantically said, "You passed out! When that freaky cloak figure came in here, you started trembling and just blacked out! Then that thing left and I laid you down on the seat. That's when you woke up."

"Uh, who was breathing all deep, like from When A Stranger Calls?" Jade asked weakly.

Keira furrowed her eyebrows. "Jade, no one was breathing like that."

Once they got off the train, Jade and Keira were both startled when a loud voice yelled, "Firs' years this way!" They quickly followed the voice and saw a gigantic man with a curly black beard that covered most of his face.

"Excuse me," Jade said quietly to the man. He turned his dark eyes to her. "We're the American Transfer Students."

"Oh! Yeah, Professor McGonagall told me abou' yer two. C'mon, follow me," he replied. Jade, Keira, and the trembling first years stumbled down a narrow path, the rain pouring down. The narrow path suddenly opened to a great black lake. Jade gasped at the sight of the gorgeous castle perched atop a mountain, its windows sparkling.

"No more'n four to a boat," the large man called out, pointing at a fleet of little boats sitting on the shore. Keira and Jade go into our boat

with two giggling blonde first years. "Everyone in?" the man's voice shot out through the cold night air. "Right then. Forward!"

The boats glided over the smooth surface of the lake, slowly bringing them to the castle. Once they got to the castle, Jade and Keira got out of the boat and, along with the other first years, followed the gigantic man up a flight of stone steps. They all crowded around a huge, oak front door.

The man raised a massive fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

The door swung open, revealing a short, white-bearded wizard in grey robes. "The first years, Professor Flitwick," the giant man said. "And the two transfer students," he added, glancing at Jade and Keira.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here," Professor Flitwick squeaked, pulling the door wide open.

The Entrance Hall was stunning, with flaming torches, high ceilings, and a magnificent marble staircase. They followed Professor Flitwick across the stone floor. Professor Flitwick showed us into a small, empty chamber.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor Flitwick said. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

“The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I shall return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly.” Professor Flitwick then walked out of the chamber.

Jade looked over to see Keira was trembling. “Keira, relax,” she said kindly. Keira only nodded in response.

After a couple minutes of tense silence, Professor Flitwick came back into the chamber. “Form a line and follow me,” he ordered. They all walked into the Great Hall.

The Great Hall was lit by thousands of floating candles. Four long tables were set up for the students. At the top of the hall was another table where the teachers were sitting. All of the tables were laid with golden goblets and plates. All of the students and teachers watched the first years, Jade, and Keira. Professor Flitwick led them to the head table. Jade looked up and was shocked to see a stormy sky.

Jade looked down and saw Professor Flitwick silently placing a four-legged stool on the ground. On top of the stool, he placed a pointed wizard’s hat. The hat was extremely dirty and frayed. Suddenly, a rip near the brim opened wide and the hat began to sing:

Oh, you may not think I’m pretty

But don’t judge on what you see

I’ll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me

You can keep your bowlers black

Your top hats sleek and tall

For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all

There’s nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can’t see

*So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be
You might belong in Gryffindor
Where dwell the brave of heart
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff
Where they are just and loyal
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw
If you've a ready mind
Where those of wit and learning
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flop!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)*

For I'm a Thinking Cap

The whole hall burst in applause when the hat finished. It bowed and became still again. Professor Flitwick stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and be sorted," he squeaked. "Braxton, Keira!"

Keira, who looked paler than usual, slowly walked up to the stool and put on the hat. For a moment, it was silent. Then, the hat shouted, "RAVENCLAW!"

The second to the left clapped as Keira rushed over to them and sat down.

"Potter, Jade!"

As Jade stepped forward, whispers erupted from behind me.

"Did he say Potter?"

"She couldn't possibly be related to Harry Potter!"

Jade ignored the whispers and confidently walked to the stool, thrusting the hat onto her head. She didn't even jump when she heard a voice talk in her ear.

"Ah, also difficult. I must say, you are too outgoing for Hufflepuff, but too selfless for Slytherin. I see plenty of knowledge and bravery. Oh, yes, you believe that family outrules everything. And you would risk anything to protect your family. Well, better be GRYFFINDOR!"

When yelled out that last word, Jade grinned and strode over to the cheering table on the far left. She sat in front of a tall red-headed boy.

As Jade took her seat, she gazed at the High Table. Jade looked at the wizard sitting the center on a large gold chair. He was thin and looked very old and tall. He had silver hair, a white beard that touched the floor, a crooked nose, and twinkling blue eyes. Albus Dumbledore glanced over at Jade and winked.

When the Sorting was over, Professor Flitwick carried the hat and stool out of the hall. When Jade looked across the table, she was shocked to see two people sitting on either side of the red-head.

They were of different genders. The girl had long bushy brown and slightly large front-teeth. The boy, however, looked strangely familiar to Jade. He had messy black hair, bright green eyes, and black-rimmed glasses.

Jade looked at the High Table again and saw Professor Dumbledore stand. "Welcome," he exclaimed. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you get befuddled by our excellent feast..."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, "As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

Jade involuntarily shivered when she remembered the cloaked figure.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises – or even Invisibility Cloaks. It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the prefects and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the dementors.

"On a happier note, I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." Jade politely clapped as a slightly shabby-looking wizard with light brown hair stood.

After Professor Lupin sat back down, Dumbledore continued. "As to our second appointment. Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end

of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his game keeping duties.”

The applause was tremendous for the ruby-faced man.

“We should have known!” Jade heard the red-head say to his friends. “Who else would have assigned us a biting book?”

“Well, I think that’s everything of importance,” Dumbledore said after the clapping ceased. “Let the feast begin!” The golden plates were filled with mouth-watering dishes: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops, sausages, bacon, steak, boiled potatoes, and list went on.

Jade piled her plate with a little bit of everything, feeling her stomach growl.

“Think you have enough to eat?” Jade looked up to see the bushy-haired girl raising an eyebrow at me.

Jade grinned and said, “You can never have enough.”

The girl smiled and put her hand out, saying “I’m Hermione Granger.”

Jade shook her hand and responded, “I’m Jade Potter.”

“What year are you in?”

“3rd. I’m a transfer student from America.”

“Oh, what school did you go to?”

Jade shook her head. “I was home-schooled.”

Jade and Hermione spent the rest of the feast talking about America and England and their differences and similarities.

After she said goodbye to Hermione at the end of the feast, Jade looked around for Keira, anxious to see how her best friend was doing.

Once Jade caught sight of her golden hair, Jade slipped through the crowd and walked over to the entrance. Jade was slightly disappointed that she was alone, but not surprised. Keira had always been kind of shy.

"Hey, Keira," Jade greeted when she caught up to her best friend.

Her whole face brightened when she caught sight of Jade. "Hey Jade! I want you meet my new friend, Luna Lovegood."

Luna Lovegood, who had suddenly appeared next to Keira, had straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look.

"Nice to meet you, Luna. Well, I better get to my common room. Good night."

After asking a couple students, Jade walked down to the Gryffindor Common Room. Jade finally came to a portrait of a fat woman in a pink dress.

"Password?" she asked.

Jade bit her lip. *'I didn't know we need a password. What am I-'*

Two identical voices said at the exact same time, "Fortuna Major," making Jade jump.

She turned to see twin red heads standing behind her, grinning.

"Uh, thanks," Jade said awkwardly as the portrait swung open. She scrambled through the entrance and into the Common Room, a cozy, round room full of squashy arm chairs. Nobody was in the room, except for a 2nd year going through a door to her dormitory.

Jade followed the girl up the stairs and stopped at the top. She opened a random door and saw Hermione sitting on one of the five four-posters. Jade's trunk had already been brought up, so Jade grabbed some pajamas and went into the bathroom to change.

After Jade had changed into:

She crawled into her bed and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 2

"Jade, Jade, wake up!"

Jade awoke to someone grasping her shoulders and shaking them. She slowly opened her eyes to see Hermione leaning over her. "Come on! We have to get ready!"

She groaned and pulled back the covers, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. Seeing as how no one was in the shower, Jade hopped in and quickly bathed herself.

Once she dried herself off, Jade put on her uniform and brushed her hair into a pony-tail. Jade looked up into the mirror and gazed at her mirror.

She saw a thin girl with long black hair pulled back and dark hazel eyes. Tearing her eyes away from her reflection, Jade turned and walked back into the empty dormitory.

Jade slung her bag over her shoulder and silently walked down to the Common Room and to the Great Hall. She sat by herself at the end of the Gryffindor table and slowly ate a piece of toast.

She then got her schedule from a prefect and examined it. '*Divination first,*' she thought dryly. '*This is going to be a long day.*'

Grabbing her bag off of the seat next to her, Jade stood and walked out of the Great Hall, wishing Keira was in her house.

Luckily, Heather had given Jade an old map of Hogwarts and made the girl memorize it, so Jade knew exactly where the North Tower was. She tiredly climbed up the staircase and came to an empty tiny landing. There were no doors off this landing except a trapdoor on the ceiling, making Jade furrow her eyebrows in confusion.

Shrugging her shoulders, Jade sat on the floor, resting her back against the cold wall. She took out her reading book, Twilight, and opened it and began reading.

Slowly, the landing began to fill with students. Finally, once everybody was there, the trap door opened and a silvery ladder descended to the floor. Everyone grew quiet.

Jade was the first to enter the room. She emerged into the strangest-looking class room she had ever seen. It looked more like a cross between someone's attic and an old-fashioned teashop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all close and the many lamps were draped with red scarves. It was stifling warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of tea cups.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

"Welcome," it said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

Jade's first impression of Professor Trelawney was that she looked like a large glittering insect. She moved into the firelight, and Jade saw she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy shawl.

"Sit, my children, sit," she said, and Jade sat at a random table. She was shocked to see Hermione sit next to her.

"Welcome to Divination," said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. "My name is Professor Trelawney. You may have not seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

Jade raised an eyebrow, but Professor Trelawney continued, "So you have chosen Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field.

“Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearing, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future. It is a Gift granted to few. You, boy,” she said suddenly to Neville Longbottom, who had a round face. “Is your grandmother well?”

“I think so,” Neville replied tremulously.

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you, dear,” said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glittering on her long emerald earrings.

The boy gulped.

Professor Trelawney continued placidly, “We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear,” she abruptly said to Parvati Patil, “beware a red-haired man.”

She gave a startled look at Ron Weasley, who was right behind her, and edged away from her.

“In the second term,” Professor Trelawney went on, “we shall progress to crystal balls-if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our numbers will leave us forever.”

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

“I wonder, dear,” she said to Lavender Brown, “if you could pass the largest silver teapot.”

Lavender stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

“Thank you, dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading--it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October.

Lavender trembled.

“Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging The Future. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear,” she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up-“after you’ve broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I’m rather attached to the pink.”

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached to shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, “One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn’t mind...thank you....”

When Hermione and Jade had their teacups filled, they went back to the table and drank the scalding tea. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney instructed. Then they drained the cups and swapped over.

“I’ll go first,” Hermione said as the two girls opened their books to pages five and six.

“So, what do you see?” Jade asked after a couple minutes passed.

“Well, the signs say that you’ve found your true love but will not fall in love with him until a long time,” Hermione said, furrowing her eyebrows.

“Wow, that make sense,” Jade replied sarcastically.

Just then, Professor Trelawney grabbed Harry’s cup and said, “The falcon.....my dear, you have a great enemy.”

“But everyone knows *that*,” Hermione said. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

“Well, they do,” Hermione continued. “Everyone knows about Harry and You-Know- Who.”

Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup and continued to turn it. "The club...on attack. Dead, dear, this is not a happy cup."

"I thought that was a bowler hat," Hermione's red-headed friend said sheepishly.

"The skull...danger in your path, my dear..."

Everybody was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sunk into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy...my poor, dear boy...no...no...it is kinder not to say...no...don't ask me..."

"What is it, Professor?" Dean Thomas asked at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around the two boys' table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney's chair to get a good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's eyes opened dramatically, "you have the Grim."

Jade rolled her eyes. Heather had told her that Professor Trelawney was a complete fraud and not to trust her one bit. Apparently, Heather was correct.

"The what?" Dean asked obviously confused.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that the boy hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen—the worst omen—of *death!*"

Everyone stared at Harry, except Hermione and Jade. Hermione had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney's chair.

“I don’t think it looks like the Grim,” she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

“You’ll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s exactly what she needs to become an excellent witch,” Jade snapped without thinking.

Before Professor Trelawney could reply to Jade’s remark, Seamus Finnegan said, “It looks like a Grim if you do this,” his eyes almost shut. “But it looks more like a donkey from here,” he said, leaning to the left.

“When you’ve all finished deciding whether I’m going to die or not!” snapped Harry. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him. Nobody, that is, except for Jade.

“I think we will leave the lesson here for today,” Professor Trelawney said in her mistiest voice. “Yes...please pack away your things...”

Silently Jade took her teacup back to Professor Trelawney, packed away her books, and closed her bag.

“Until we meet again,” Professor Trelawney said faintly, “fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear,” she pointed to Neville, “you’ll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up!”

Jade was last to exit the classroom, and she made sure to distance herself from the rest of the class. She set off to Professor McGonagall’s Transfiguration lesson. Heather had told Jade that McGonagall was strict, but fair.

Once she got to the classroom, Jade noticed Harry take a seat in the back of the class. Jade tilted her head to the side and sat next to him.

“You okay?” she asked quietly.

“I was just told I was going to die. Would you be okay?” Harry snarled.

“And you’re telling me you actually listen to what tea leaves say?” Jade asked incredulously.

At this time, Professor McGonagall entered the room and began telling us about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals). Jade was so caught up in thinking about her first day so far, that she didn’t even notice McGonagall alter into a tabby cat.

“Really, what has gotten into you all today?” said McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint *pop*, staring around at the class. “Not that it matters, but that’s the first time my transformation’s not got applause from a class.”

Nobody spoke. Hermione boldly raised her hand into the air.

“Please, Professor, we’ve just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and--”

“Ah, of course,” said McGonagall, suddenly frowning. “There is no need to say anymore, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?”

“Me,” said Harry, finally.

“I see,” said Professor McGonagall, staring at Harry with her beady eyes. “Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney had predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them have died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were no the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues--”

McGonagall broke off, and they saw her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, “Divination is one of the imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney--”

She stopped again and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, “You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don’t let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in.”

Hermione and Jade laughed. Harry looked like he felt a little better. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, "But what about Neville's cup?"

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

Jade took a seat away from everyone else and slowly ate a small salad. For some reason, she didn't feel very hungry.

"Eating by yourself?" a familiar voice asked.

Jade looked up to see Hermione dropping her bag on the bench and sitting next to the dark-haired girl. "Yeah. What are you doing?"

"I'm eating some stew. I'm starving," Hermione said distantly. Jade raised an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just...my friend, Ron. He said the only reason I didn't like Professor Trelawney was because she said I didn't have the right aura," she complained.

"Boys are like that. They can be complete idiots sometimes," Jade said, grinning slightly.

"That's for sure. But, you don't think that's true, do you?"

"I'm not sure, Hermione," Jade said truthfully. "I don't know you as well. But, you shouldn't really listen to anything Trelawney says. My foster mother, Heather, told me that Trelawney's *visions* are a complete hoax. And, from I saw in Transfiguration today, Heather's not the only one who thinks that."

Hermione nodded, looking happier. "C'mon, we have Care of Magical Creatures next. If we get there early enough, I'll introduce you to Hagrid."

Hermione and Jade left the castle and made their way across the grounds, talking about random topics. When the two girls finally got to Hagrid's hut, Hermione knocked on the large wooden door.

The door swung open, revealing the man that had taken Jade, Keira, and the first years to the castle. He was wearing a moleskin overcoat and was holding a large boarhound back by the collar.

"Ah, Hermione! C'min, c'min!"

Hermione and Jade entered the slightly cramped cabin and sat in two rather large chairs.

"Hagrid, this is Jade Potter, one of the transfer students," Hermione introduced.

"It's nice ter meet yeh," Hagrid said, beaming warmly down at Jade.

"Same here," Jade replied kindly.

For the rest of the lunch, Hagrid, Hermione, and Jade talked about their first day and Professor Trelawney.

"Oh, Hagrid, class is about to start. We should get outside," Hermione said, glancing at her watch.

"It was really great meeting you, sir."

"Ah, Jade, yeh don't have ter call me sir," Hagrid said, waving one of his large hands in the air.

Jade grinned and she and Hermione walked out of the cabin and they both sat on the grass, waiting for everyone else.

Once everyone in the class was waiting at the cabin, Hagrid stepped outside with Fang, his boarhound, at his heels.

"C'mon, now, get a move on!" he yelled to any stragglers. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

“Everyone gather ‘round the fence here!” he called. “That’s it—make sure yeh can see—now, firs’ thing yeh’ll want ter do is open yer books—”

“How?” said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

“Eh?” called Hagrid.

“How do we open our books?” Malfoy repeated, holding up a copy of The Monster Book of Monsters that was bound shut with a length of rope. Jade looked down her book, which was still and unbound. She was slightly shocked that the others’ books were bound.

“Hasn’—hasn’ anyone bin able ter open their books?” asked Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

They all shook their heads, except for Jade, who confidently raised her hand.

“Ah, Jade, guess Miz Williams helped yeh?” Hagrid asked. She silently nodded, giving him a small smile.

“Well, yeh’ve got ter stroke ‘em,” Hagrid said to the rest of the class. “Look--”

He took Hermione’s copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down the spine, and the book shivered, and then fell open and lay quietly in his hand.

“Oh, how silly we’ve all been!” Malfoy sneered. “We should have stroked them! Why didn’t we guess?!”

“I—I thought they were funny,” Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

“Oh, tremendously funny!” Malfoy exclaimed. “Real witty, giving us books that try and rip our heads off!”

"You better watch it, Malfoy, or I might rip your head off!" Jade snarled. Hagrid seemed like a really good guy, and she didn't want some punk to mess up his first day.

"Righ' then," said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, "so—yeh've got yer books—an'—an'—now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I'll go an' get 'em. Hang on..."

He strode away and from them into the forest and out of sight.

"God, this place has gone to the dogs," said Malfoy loudly. "That oaf teaching class, my father will have a fit when I tell him—"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said quietly.

"Careful, Potter, there's a dementor behind you--"

"Oooooooh!" squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen bizarre creatures. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

"Get up, there!" he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

"Hippogriffs!" Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. "Beau'iful, aren' they?"

Jade silently agreed. Once you got past the shock of seeing something that was half horse, half eagle, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs' gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

“So,” said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, “if yeh wan’ ter come a bit nearer--”

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.

“Now, firs’ thing yeh gotta know abou’ hippogriffs is, they’re proud,” Hagrid said. “Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don’t never insult one, ‘cause it may be the last thing yeh do. Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs’ move. It’s polite, see? Yeh walk toward home, and yeh bow, an’ yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh’re allowed ter touch him. If he doesn’ bow, then get away from sharpish, ‘cause those talons hurt.

“Right—who wants ter go first?”

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn’t seem to like being tethered like this.

“No one?” said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

“I’ll do it,” said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, “Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!”

Harry ignored them and climbed over the paddock fence.

“Good man, Harry!” roared Hagrid. “Right then—let’s see how yeh get with Buckbeak.”

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. Jade pushed back the urge to bite her nails, a nervous habit.

“Easy, now, Harry,” Hagrid said quietly. “Yeh’ve got eye contact, now try not ter blink...Hippogriffs don’ trust yeh if yeh blink too much...”

Harry stared Buckbeak in the eye, never breaking eye contact.

“Tha’s it,” said Hagrid. “Tha’s it, Harry...now...bow...”

He gave a short bow and looked up. The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn’t move.

“Ah,” Hagrid said, sounding worried. “Right—back away, now, Harry, easy does it--”

But then, the hippogriff suddenly bent its front knees slowly and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

“Well done, Harry!” said Hagrid, ecstatic. “Right—yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!”

Jade watched as Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

Jade joined in as the class broke in applause.

“Righ’ then, Harry,” said Hagrid. “I reckon you he migh’ let yeh ride him! Yeh climb up there, jus’ behind the wing joint, an’ mind yeh don’t pull any of his feathers out, he won’ like that...”

Harry put his foot on top of Buckbeak’s wing and hoisted himself onto his back. Buckbeak stood.

“Go on, then!” roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriff’s hindquarters.

Without warning, Buckbeak spread his wings out and soared upward. Jade watched in awe as Buckbeak circled the paddock and landed.

“Good work, Harry!” roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. “Okay, who else wants a go?”

Everyone else climbed cautiously into the paddock as Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one. Soon, people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Jade walked over to Harry, who was watching.

“Nice job,” she complimented him.

“Thanks,” he grinned.

Jade was about to speak again, when they heard a familiar drawl.

"This is very easy," Malfoy said loudly. "I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it...I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he said to Buckbeak. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak into his collar as he strained to get the Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

"I'm dying!" Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!"

"Yer not dyin!" said Hagrid, who had gone very white. "Someone help me—gotta get him outta here--"

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Jade saw a long, deep gash on Malfoy's arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope and toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

"They should fire him straight away!" said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

"It was Malfoy's fault!" snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

"I'm going to see if he's okay!" said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

"D'you think he'll be alright?" said Hermione nervously.

"Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second," reassured Harry.

“That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid’s first class, though, wasn’t it?” said Ron, looking worried. “Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him...”

When they went to the Great Hall for dinner, Jade quickly excused herself from the trio and sat next to Keira, who was sitting alone, at the Ravenclaw table.

“Hey, Keira,” Jade greeted, sitting in front of her best friend.

“Hi, Jade.”

“Where’s Luna?” Jade inquired, piling her plate with steak and kidney pudding.

“Oh, she wasn’t hungry. So, how was your first day?” Keira said.

Before Jade could answer, an Asian girl with dark eyes stopped in front of the table and said, “Gryffindors are supposed to sit at the Gryffindor Table.”

“Listen, I just want to talk to my friend--”

“I don’t want excuses. I told you to go sit at your own table!” the girl ordered.

“I don’t care about what you tell me. I’m staying here,” Jade snarled, getting irritated.

“Don’t you know who I am!” the girl demanded.

“No, and, to tell you the truth, I don’t really give a damn!”

The girl narrowed her eyes at Jade and spun on her heel, fuming, and sat with her group of friends. One of the girls, Jade noticed, was the giggling first year that Keira and Jade shared their boat with.

Jade turned back to Keira and asked, “Who was that?”

“That’s Cho Chang. Her parents are really rich Aurors. I have to share a dorm with her and her slutty friend, Claire. It stinks because all they do is gossip and talk about boys and their hair.”

“What do you say we give them something to talk about?” Jade suggested mischievously.

Keira arched an eyebrow and said, “Oh, God, Jade, Heather said not to get into any fights!”

Jade smirked and took out her wand, subtly pointing at Cho’s full plate. “*Levina*,” she whispered. 3 seconds later, Cho’s steak and kidney pudding exploded, getting into her perfect hair.

She squealed and bolted out of the Great Hall, a brunette girl running after her.

Jade and Keira burst out laughing, not knowing that they had made two new enemies.

Chapter 3

After dinner, Jade said good night to Keira and walked back to the Common Room.

She sat down on a squishy couch in front of a roaring fire. Opening the bag that was slung over her shoulder, Jade grabbed her Transfiguration book and started to do her homework.

"That was a pretty good prank you played," a voice said from behind Jade. She twisted her neck around to see one of the red heads from the night before smirking down at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jade said coolly, but there was a small smile forming on her lips.

The boy sat down next to Jade, still smirking. "Really? So, I guess Cho Changs' dinner just suddenly exploded as you were putting your wand away?"

"Yep," was Jade's only reply.

"Well, if someone just happened to prank Cho Chang, I'd have to say I was very impressed," the boy grinned.

"Hmm, well, if some one just happened to prank Cho Chang, they'd probably say thank you," Jade mocked. "Now, if you don't mind, I have to go to bed. All this pranking really wears me out. Good night..."

"George Weasley," George introduced.

"Good night, George," Jade said.

She put her book and her homework back in her bag and walked up the girls' dormitory when George called after her, "You never told me what your name was!"

"I never gave it," Jade said, and she ascended the stairs, a big smile plastered on her face.

Malfoy didn't appear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through Double Potions.

Professor Snape, in Jade's opinion, was a greasy-haired freak. And Snape obviously had something against Jade.

"How is it, Draco?" Pansy Parkinson simpered. "Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace.

"Settle down, settle down," said Professor Snape idly.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, who was next to Jade, so they were preparing their ingredients on the same table.

"Sir," Malfoy called, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm--"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Ron seized the knife, pulled Malfoy's roots towards him, and began to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

"Professor," drawled Malfoy, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sir."

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, and then gave an unpleasant smile from beneath his long, greasy black hair.

"Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But sir--"

Ron spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

"Now!" said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table at Malfoy and took up the knife again.

"And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned," said Malfoy, his voice filled with malicious laughter.

"Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig," said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved for him. But, Jade had noticed that the looks Snape shot in her direction were almost as bad.

Harry took Malfoy's shrivelfig as Ron tried to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shrivelfig as fast as he could and flung it across the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

"See your pal, Hagrid, lately?" he asked them quietly.

"None of your business," said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. "Father's not very happy about my injury--"

"Keep talking, Malfoy, and I'll give you a real injury," snarled Ron.

"—he's complained to the school governors. And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know. And a lasting injury like this"—he gave a huge, fake sigh—"who knows if my arm'll ever be the same again."

"Shut your mouth, Malfoy, or I'll rip that arm off and stick it down your throat!" Jade snapped, fed up with his snooty attitude.

"Ah, Ms. Jade Potter. I've heard of you and your other transfer friend. Tell me, is she seeing anyone? Because I'd love to teach her a few tricks," Malfoy drawled.

“Fuck you!” Jade half-yelled, making the class go silent.

“Ms. Potter, 20 points from Gryffindor for your language. Clean it up or I’ll deduct 50 and give you detention for the rest of the term,” Snape said in a dangerous voice.

Jade bit her tongue, trying to calm her temper.

A few cauldrons down, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned—

“Orange, Longbottom,” said Snape, ladling some up and allowing it to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see. “Orange. Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn’t you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one rat spleen was needed? Didn’t I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?”

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

“Please, sir,” said Hermione, “please, I could help Neville put it right--”

“I don’t remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger,” said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. “Longbottom, at the end of this lesson, we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly.”

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

“Help me!” he moaned to Hermione.

“Hey, Harry,” said Seamus Finnegan, leaning over to borrow Harry’s brass scales, “have you heard? *The Daily Prophet* this morning—they reckon Sirius Black’s been sighted.”

“Where?” said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy and Jade looked up, listening closely.

“Not to far from here,” said Seamus, who looked excited. “It was a Muggle who saw him. ‘Course, she didn’t really understand. The Muggles think he’s just an ordinary criminal, don’t they? So, she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone.”

“Not to far from here...,” Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. Jade raised an eyebrow at their distant behavior, but went back to her work. Ron turned around and saw Malfoy watching them closely. “What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?”

But Malfoy’s eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed on Harry. He leaned across the table.

“Thinking of trying to catch Black single-handed, Potter?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Harry said offhandedly.

Malfoy’s thin mouth was curving into a mean smile.

“Of course, if it were me,” he said quietly, “I’d have done something before now. I wouldn’t be staying in school like a good boy. I’d be out there, looking for him.”

“What are you talking about, Malfoy?” said Ron roughly.

“Don’t you *know*, Potter?” breathed Malfoy, his pale eyes narrowed.

“Know what?”

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

“Maybe you’d rather not risk your neck,” he said. “Want to leave it to the dementors, do you? But if it was me, I’d want revenge. I’d hunt him down myself.”

“What *are you* talking about?” said Harry angrily, but at that moment, Snape called, “You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk. So, clear away while it simmers and then we’ll test Longbottom’s...”

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering instructions to him out of the corner of her mouth, so that Snape wouldn't see. Jade silently packed away her unused ingredients and washed her hands, thinking about what Malfoy said.

'Heather said she didn't know anything about Sirius Black,' Jade thought. 'But she was really nervous and she wouldn't meet my eyes. I can't help but wonder where she went off to after I left for Hogwarts.'

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

"Everyone gather 'round," said Snape, his black eyes glittering, "and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he managed to produce a Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned."

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked excited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dropped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of tense silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small pop, and Trevor the tadpole was wriggling in Snape's palm.

The Gryffindor burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a few drops on top of Trevor, and he reappeared suddenly, full grown.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Class dismissed."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Jade listened to Ron seethe about Snape.

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right! Why didn't you lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville did it all by himself!"

Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry and Jade turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watching the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

"She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared.

"There she is," said Jade.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something down the front of her robes.

"How did you do that?" said Ron.

"What?" said Hermione, joining them.

"One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again."

"What?" Hermione looked slightly confused. "Oh—I had to go back for something. Oh no--"

A seam had split on Hermione's bag. Jade wasn't surprised; she could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen large and heavy books.

"Why are you carrying all these around with you?" Ron asked her.

"You know how many subjects I'm taking," said Hermione breathlessly. "Could you hold these for me?"

"But--" Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. "You haven't got any of these subjects today. It's only Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon."

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. “I hope there’s something good for lunch, I’m starving,” she added, and she marched off toward the Great Hall.

“D’you get the feeling Hermione’s not telling us something?” Ron asked Harry and Jade.

Professor Lupin wasn’t there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, took out their books, quills, and parchment, and were talking when he finally entered the room. Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher’s desk.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Would you please put all your books back in your bag? Today will be a practical lesson”

“Right then,” said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. “If you’d follow me.”

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner, where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn’t look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song.

“Loony, loopy Lupin,” Peeves sang. “Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy Lupin--”

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to their surprise, he was still smiling.

“I’d take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves,” he said pleasantly. “Mr. Filch won’t be able to get in his brooms.”

Filch was the Hogwarts caretaker, a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students and, indeed, Peeves.

However, Peeves paid no attention to Professor Lupin's words, except to blow a loud wet raspberry.

"Professor Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand.

"This is a useful little spell," he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, "*Waddiwas!*" and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeve's left nostril; he whirled up-right and zoomed away, cursing.

"Cool, sir!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Professor Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"

They set off again, the class looking at shabby Professor Lupin with increased respect. He led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom.

"Inside, please," said Professor Lupin, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Professor Snape was sitting in a low armchair, and he looked around as the class filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a nasty sneer playing around his mouth. As Professor Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this."

He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes billowing behind him. At the doorway, he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Neville went scarlet. Jade glared at Snape; he had no right to insult students, especially in front of other teachers.

Professor Lupin had raised his eyebrows.

"I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said, "and I am sure he will perform admirably."

Neville's face went, if possible, even redder. Snape's lip curled, but he left, shutting the door with a snap.

"Now, then," said Professor Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

"Nothing to worry about," said Professor Lupin calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. "There's a boggart in there."

Jade took a nervous step back, her eyes widened in terror.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap behind beds, the cupboard under sinks—I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. *This* one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice.

"So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what *is* a boggart?"

Hermione put up her hand.

"It's a shape-shifter," she said. "It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he's alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become what ever each of us fears the most.

"This means," said Professor Lupin, choosing to ignore Neville's small sputter of terror, "that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have we spotted it yet, Harry?"

Harry, who seemed to have trouble answering with Hermione bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, said, “Er—because there are so many of us, it won’t know what shape it should be?”

“Precisely,” said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed. “It’s always best to have company when you’re dealing with a boggart. He becomes confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake—tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening.

“The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is *laughter*. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape you find amusing.

“We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please...*riddikulus!*”

“*Riddikulus!*” said the class together.

“Good,” said Professor Lupin. “Very good. But that was the easy part, I’m afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville.”

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Neville, who walked forward as though he were heading for the gallows.

“Right, Neville,” said Professor Lupin. “First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you the most in the world?”

Neville’s lips moved, but no sound came out.

“Didn’t catch that, Neville, sorry,” said Professor Lupin cheerfully.

Neville looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him and then said, in barely more than a whisper, “Professor Snape.”

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically. Professor Lupin, however, looked thoughtful.

“Professor Snape...hmmm...Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?”

“Er—yes,” said Neville nervously. “But—I don’t want the boggart to turn into her either.”

“No, no, you misunderstood me,” said Professor Lupin, now smiling. “I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?”

Neville looked startled, but said, “Well...always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress...green, normally...and sometimes a fox-fur scarf.”

“And a handbag?” prompted Professor Lupin.

“A big red one,” said Neville.

“Right then,” said Professor Lupin. “Can you picture these clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind’s eye?”

“Yes,” said Neville uncertainly, plainly wondering what was coming next.

“When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees you, it will assume the form of Professor Snape,” said Lupin. “And you will raise your wand—thus—and cry Riddikulus—and concentrate hard on your grandmother’s clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag.”

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

“If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn,” said Professor Lupin. “I would like all of you to take a moment how to think of thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical...”

The room went quiet. Jade closed her eyes.

Jade rocked her brain for something that scared her. Suddenly, a pair of cold, unsettling pure blue eyes filled her mind. Her eyes shot open and she breathed in a raspy breath.

“Everyone ready?” said Professor Lupin.

Jade felt her hands turn to ice, something that happened whenever she was nervous. But she said nothing.

“Neville, we’re going to back away,” said Professor Lupin. “Let you have a clear field, all right? I’ll call the next person forward...Everyone, back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot--”

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready.

“On the count of three, Neville,” said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. “One—two—three—*now!*”

A jet of sparks erupted from the end of Professor Lupin’s wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

“*R—r—riddikulus!*” squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, “Parvati! Forward!”

Parvati walked forward, her face set, Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a blood-stained, bandaged mummy; his sightless face was turned to Parvati and he

began to walked toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its arms rising--

"Riddikulus!" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a women with floor-length black hair and a skeletal-green-tinged face—a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the Jade's hair stand on end—

"Riddikulus!" shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then—*crack!*—became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before—*crack!*—becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

"It's confused!" shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"Riddikulus!" yelled Dean.

There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mouse-trap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pinchers menacingly. For a moment, Jade thought Ron had frozen. Then—

“Riddikulus!” bellowed Ron, and the spider’s legs vanished; it rolled over and over. It came to a halt at Jade’s feet.

Crack!

A tall man with thick brown hair and icy blue eyes stared down at Jade. He raised his hand and suddenly slapped her across the face. Jade’s wand fell to the floor. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell into a pit of darkness.

“Jade! Jade, wake up!” a vaguely familiar exclaimed.

Jade eyes fluttered open and she slowly sat up from the stone floor. Her cheek stung, reminding her of what had happened.

Professor Lupin was kneeled next to her and gazing at the girl in concern. The rest of the class had been dismissed.

“Here,” he said, pushing a cup of tea into her hands. She took a small sip, loving the feel of the sweet liquid on her lips.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “How did you know tea soothes me?”

Lupin smiled warmly. “Your mother loved tea. Now, Jade, I need you to tell me who that man was.”

Jade sighed and hesitated. She felt a strong connection with this man, for some strange reason. “About two years ago, Heather and I had a power outage.” Upon seeing the understanding of electricity in Lupin’s eyes, she continued. “Somehow, a man broke into our house. I was asleep at this time.

“I woke up to Heather, my foster mother, screaming. I had bolted out of bed and ran to Heather’s room. The man, Victor Corvin, was straddling Heather and the scumbag was trying to take her shirt off.”

Jade shuddered at the memory. "I can't even remember feeling so much anger. Before I knew what was happening, a vase suddenly came down on Levine's head. That was the first time that I had ever used magic."

Lupin stared at the third-year in shock. "Jade, I...I...don't know what to say. Only, I'm sorry."

Jade waved his apology away. "Don't worry about it. It's in the past now. Anyways, why should you be sorry? You had no control over what happened."

Lupin nodded, smiling slightly. "Well then, I guess you should go."

"Yeah. Thanks, Professor."

"For what?"

"For listening," was Jade's only reply before she left the classroom, her tea cup abandoned on the floor.

Chapter 4

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins had anything to say about Professor Lupin.

"Look at the state of robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. "He dressed like our old house-elf."

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first. After boggarts, they studied Red Caps, little goblin like creatures that lurked wherever there had been blood shed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps to kappas, creepy water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Jade was happy with most of her classes. She seemed to excel in Potions and Charms, which made her extremely happy.

Cho Chang, still angry about her exploding dinner, had made an effort in making fun of Keira. Claire, Cho's best friend, also teased Keira. This, however, did not faze Keira.

"Why should I care about what two girls with the combined IQ of a raisin have to say?" Keira had said during one dinner.

Jade had also made some friends. Hermione and her hung out a lot and had become close friends. Jade had told her about Victor Corvin and practically her whole life-story in exchange for Hermione's tales of her, Ron, and Harry's adventures during their two years in Hogwarts. Hermione also had let her in on the secret that Sirius Black, an infamous killer, was after Harry.

Harry and Ron had become friends with Jade, which made her even happier. And Fred and George Weasley, who both made Jade laugh harder than she'd ever laughed during her late nights in the common room.

It was the beginning of October, and Jade was lounging in the Gryffindor Common Room, reading Eldest, by Christopher Poalini. Ron and Hermione were completing some star charts, while Harry was out, training with his Quidditch team.

Jade was trying to ignore the buzz of the room when Harry walked into the Common Room.

"What happened?" he asked Ron, Jade, and Hermione.

"First Hogsmeade weekend," said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. "End of October. Halloween."

"Excellent," said Fred Weasley, who had followed Harry through the portrait hole. "I need to visit Zonkos. I'm nearly out of Stink Pellets."

Jade watched Harry throw himself into a chair, puzzled about why he seemed so down.

"Harry, I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," said Hermione. "They're bound to catch Black soon. He's been sighted one already."

"Black's not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The next one might not be for ages--"

"*Ron!*" said Hermione. "Harry's supposed to stay *in school*--"

"He can't be the only third year left behind," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry--"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Harry, making up his mind. Jade silently agreed with him.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks, her ginger cat, lightly leapt onto her lap. A large, dead spider was dangling from his mouth.

"Does he have to eat that in front of us?" said Ron, scowling.

“Clever, Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?” said Hermione.

Crookshanks slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

“Just keep him over there, that’s all,” said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. “I’ve got Scabbers sleeping in my bag.”

Scabbers was Ron’s old rat, who was the constant target of Crookshanks.

Jade rolled her eyes and went back to her book.

“OY!” Ron suddenly roared, making Jade jump. She looked up to see Crookshanks sinking his claws deep inside Ron’s bag and tearing ferociously. “GET OFF, YOU STUPID ANIMAL!”

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crookshanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

“Ron, don’t hurt him!” squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Crookshanks still clinging to it, and Scabbers came flying out of the top—

“CATCH THAT CAT!” yelled Ron as Crookshanks freed himself from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, and chased after the terrified Scabbers.

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks, but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and shot beneath an old chest of drawers. Crookshanks skidded to a halt, crouched low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crookshanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron threw himself onto his stomach and, with great difficulty, pulled Scabbers out by the tail.

“Look at him!” he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scabbers in front of her. “He’s skin and bone! You keep that cat away from him!”

“Crookshanks doesn’t understand it’s wrong!” said Hermione, her voice shaking. “All cats chase rats, Ron!”

“There’s something funny about that animal!” said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers back into his pocket. “It heard me say that Scabbers was in my bag!”

“Oh, what rubbish,” said Hermione impatiently. “Crookshanks could *smell* him, Ron, how else d’you think--”

“That cat’s got it in for Scabbers!” said Ron, ignoring the people around him, who were starting to giggle. “And Scabbers was here first, *and* he’s ill!”

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione the next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he, Harry, Jade, and Hermione were working together on the same puffapod.

“How’s Scabbers?” Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining beans into a wooden pail.

“He’s hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking,” said Ron angrily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the greenhouse floor.

“Careful, Weasley, careful!” cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Jade silently walked next to Harry and was shocked by a soft sobbing at the front of the line.

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were looking very serious.

“What’s the matter, Lavender?” said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, Jade, and Ron went to join the group.

"She got a letter from home this morning," Parvati whispered. "It's her rabbit, Binky. He's been killed by a fox."

"Oh," said Hermione, "I'm sorry, Lavender."

"I should have known!" said Lavender tragically. "You know what day it is?"

"Er--"

"The sixteenth of October! 'The thing you're dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!' Remember? She was right, she was right!"

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then she said, "You—you were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?"

"Well, not necessarily by a *fox*," said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, "but I was *obviously* dreading him dying, wasn't I?"

"Oh," said Hermione. She paused again. Then—

"Was Binky an *old* rabbit?"

"N—no!" sobbed Lavender. "H—he was only a baby!"

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender's shoulders.

"But then, why would you dread him dying?" said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

"Well, look at it logically," said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group. "I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today--" Lavender wailed loudly. "—and she *can't* have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock--"

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," said Ron loudly, "she doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that moment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were looking daggers at each other, and when they got into class, they sat as far away from each other as possible; Ron sat next to Harry in the back while Hermione sat next to Jade in the front.

When the bell rang at the end of class, Professor McGonagall brought up the subject of Hogsmeade.

“One moment, please!” she called as the class made to leave. “As you’re all in my House, you should hand in Hogsmeade permission forms to me before Halloween. No form, no visiting the village, so don’t forget!”

Neville put up his hand.

“Please, Professor, I—I think I’ve lost--”

“Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall. “She seemed to think it was safer. Well, that’s all, you may leave.”

Hermione and Jade walked with the rest of the class to leave the classroom. They were puzzled, however, at why only Ron walked with them.

“Where’s Harry?” Jade asked curiously.

“He’s asking McGonagall about Hogsmeade,” Ron replied, avoiding eye contact with Hermione.

When Harry came out of the classroom with a disappointed expression, Jade didn’t have to ask what happened.

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, looking thoroughly depressed, even though he was putting up a façade about being okay.

“We’ll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes,” said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

“Yeah, loads,” said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry’s difficulties.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Harry, in a fake offhand voice, “I’ll see you at the feast. Have a good time.”

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking off names against a long list, peering suspiciously into every face, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn’t be going.

“I’ll see you guys later,” Jade said when she spotted Keira. They both had agreed that they would meet and go to Hogsmeade together.

“Hey, Jade,” Keira said happily.

“How are you doing?” Jade asked, hoping that Cho hadn’t gotten to her.

“Never been better!”

Jade burst out laughing at the dress Keira was wearing:

It was bright pink and had ruffles everywhere. The girls were at a clothing store, and were both having the time of their life.

“Oh, my God! You look like a Barbie doll!” Jade laughed, wiping the tears away from her eyes.

“Oh, come on, Jade! You know I look good,” Keira joked, striking a pose.

“Sure.”

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the dorky duo,” a snobby voice came from behind Jade. She rolled her eyes and turned to see Cho Chang and Claire Danes staring coldly at the two girls.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton,” said Jade in a fake girly voice.

“Uh, like, who are they?” Claire said lamely. Jade and Keira exchanged looks and both burst out laughing.

“You better watch it, bitch, or I might let out a couple secrets about you,” Cho said, getting into Jade’s face.

“Listen, sweetheart, I have no secrets. Anyways, even if I did, how would you know? I sure as hell know that mommy and daddy wouldn’t know anything about me.”

“You’ll see,” Cho said coldly and she and Claire walked out of the store.

“God, I can’t believe those two!” Keira said, rolling her eyes. “You don’t think they were serious about your secrets, do you?”

“No. You said it yourself, they aren’t that smart.” Even though Jade was saying this, she couldn’t help but feel dread fill the bottom of her stomach.

“There you go,” said Ron. “We got as much as we could carry.”

A shower of brilliantly colored sweets fell into Harry’s lap. It was dusk, and Jade had met Ron and Hermione on the way back to Hogwarts. Ron, Hermione, and Jade had just turned up in the common room, pink-faced and looking as though they’d had the time of their lives.

“Thanks,” said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. “What’s Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?”

Hermione and Ron told Harry about Dervish and Banges, the wizarding equipment shop, Zonko’s Joke Shop, into the Three Broomsticks for foaming mugs of hot butterbeer, and many places besides.

“The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want your letter to get there!”

“Honeydukes has got a new kind of fudge; they were giving out free samples, there’s a bit, look--”

“We *think* we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks--” “Wish we could have brought you some butterbeer, really warms you up--”

“What did you do, Harry?” said Jade curiously. “Did you get any work done?”

“No,” said Harry. “Lupin made me a cup of tea in his office. And then Snape came in...”

He told them all about the smoking goblet. Ron’s mouth fell open.

“*Lupin drank it?*” he gasped. “Is he mad?”

Hermione checked her watch.

“We better go down, you know, the feast’ll be starting in five minutes...” They hurried through the portrait hole and into the crowd, still discussing Snape.

“But if he—you know”—Hermione dropped her voice, glancing around—“if he was trying to—to poison Lupin—he wouldn’t have done it in front of Harry.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant water snakes.

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second helpings of everything.

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding: Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his botched beheading.

After the end of the pleasant evening, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to

Gryffindor Tower, but when they reached the corridor that ended with the portrait of the Fat Lady, they found it jammed with students.

“Why isn’t anyone going in?” said Ron curiously.

Harry and Jade peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

“Let me through, please,” said Percy Weasley, one of Ron’s older brothers, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. “What’s the holdup here? You can’t all have forgotten the password—excuse me, I’m Head Boy--”

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They heard Percy say, in a suddenly sharp voice, “Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick.”

People’s heads turned; those at the back were standing on tiptoe.

“What’s going on?” said Ginny, Ron’s younger sister, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors together to let him through, and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade moved closer to see what the trouble was.

“Oh, my--” Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor; great chunks of it had been torn away completely.

Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Snape hurrying toward him.

“We need to find her,” said Dumbledore. “Professor McGonagall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search every painting in the castle for the Fat Lady.”

“You’ll be lucky,” said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and looking delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage or worry.

“What do you mean, Peeves?” said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeve’s grin faded a little. He didn’t dare taunt Dumbledore. Instead, he adopted an oily voice that was no better than his cackle.

“Ashamed, your Headship, sir. Doesn’t want to be seen. She’s a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful,” he said happily. “Poor thing,” he added unconvincingly.

“Did she say who did it?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Oh yes, Professorhead,” said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a large bombshell in his arms. “He got very angry when she wouldn’t let him in, you see.” Peeves flipped over and grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. “Nasty temper he’s got, that Sirius Black.”

Chapter 5

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherins, who all looked extremely confused.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Professor Dumbledore told them as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrances to the hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and important. "Send word with one of the ghosts."

Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing..."

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Percy. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Ron said to Harry, Hermione, and Jade; they seized four sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione whispered anxiously.

"Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be," said Ron.

"He'd be stupid to stick around, though," said Jade, shaking her head. "He must have known that he would've drawn attention to himself with the painting."

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves on their elbows to talk. "The one night we weren't in the tower..."

"I reckon he's lost track of time," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come bursting in here."

Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: How did he get in?

"Maybe he knows how to Apparate," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away. "Just appear out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year.

"He could've flown in," suggested Dean Thomas.

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever bothered to read Hogwarts, A History?" said Hermione crossly to Harry, Ron, and Jade.

"Probably," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than walls, you know," said Hermione. "There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can't just Apparate in here. I'd here like to see the disguise fool those dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the grounds. They'd have seen him fly in too. And Filch knows all the secret passages, they'll have them covered..."

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the

prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Jade felt as though she was sleeping outdoors.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had fallen asleep, Professor Dumbledore came in. Jade watched him looking around for Percy, who had prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. Percy was only a short way from Harry, Jade, Ron, and Hermione, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledores footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently, she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Jade heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

"Headmaster?" It was Snape. Jade kept still, listening closely. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either."

"What about the Astronomy Tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched..."

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape.

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next."

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before--ah-the start of term?" said Snape.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"It seems almost impossible that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed--"

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn't reply. "I must go down to the dementors," said Dumbledore. "I said I would inform them when our search was complete."

"Didn't they want to help, sir?" said Percy.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster."

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Jade glanced sideways at Ron, Hermione, and Harry. The three of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

"What was that all about?" Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he entered the castle became wilder and wilder; Hannah Abbot, from Hufflepuff, spent much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who'd listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gray pony. Nobody was very happy about this. Sir Cadogan spent half his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated, which he changed at least twice a day.

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Frightened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan was the only one brave enough to volunteer."

It was the day before the first Quidditch Match, and Jade was sitting in Defense Against the Dark Arts with Hermione and Ron; Harry was late. Professor Snape, who was subbing for Professor Lupin, much to Jades displeasure, was saying something about how Lupin was an awful teacher.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin, I--," Harry said, dashing into the classroom.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

But Harry didn't move.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" he said.

"He says he is feeling too ill to teach today," said Snape with a twisted smile. "I believe I told you to sit down?"

But Harry stayed where he was.

"What's wrong with him?"

Snape's black eyes glittered.

"Nothing life-threatening," he said, looking as though he wished it were. "Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty."

Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

"As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far--"

Please, sir, we've done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindylows," said Hermione quickly, "and we're just about to start--"

"Be quiet," said Snape coldly. "I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin's lack of organization."

"He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had," said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. Snape looked more menacing than ever.

"You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you. I would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and grindylows. Today we shall discuss--"

Jade watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn't covered,

"Werewolves," said Snape.

"But, sir," said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, "we're not supposed to do werewolves yet, were due to start hinkypunks--"

"Miss Granger," said Snape in a voice of deadly calm. "I was under the expression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you to turn to page 394." He glanced around. "All of you! Now!"

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between a werewolf and the true werewolf?" said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it often did, had shot straight into the air.

"Anyone?" Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. "Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't even taught you the basic distinction between--?"

"We told you," said Parvati suddenly, "we haven't got as far as werewolves yet, were still on--"

"Silence!" snarled Snape. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are..."

"Please, sir," said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, "the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf--"

"That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger," said Snape coldly. "Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all."

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all at least twice a week, said loudly, "You asked us a question and she knows the answer. Why ask if you don't want to be told?"

The class knew instantly that he'd gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

"Detention, Weasley," Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron's. "And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach class again, you will be very sorry indeed."

Jade had had enough. "Wow, the last time I checked, we were supposed to tell the truth. Not lie."

Snape froze, and he suddenly backhanded Jade. Her head snapped to the side, and she let out a low hiss. "Ouch."

"Miss Potter, if you ever show me disrespect again, I will take away 100 points from Gryffindor and give you detention for the rest of your years at Hogwarts, and do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Jade said coldly, staring him straight in the eye.

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Professor Lupin.

"Very poorly explained...That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia...Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn't have given it three..."

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

"You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment on the subject, and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention."

Harry, Jade, and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were all out of earshot, then burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

"Snape's never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job," Harry said to Hermione and Jade. "Why's he got it in for Lupin? D'you think this is all because of the boggart?"

"I don't know," said Hermione pensively. "But I really hope Professor Lupin gets better soon."

"Huh, so do I," Jade muttered, wincing when her cheek stung.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Been better," said Jade.

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

"D'you know what that"--(he called Snape something that made Hermione say Ron!)--"is making me do? I've got to scrub out the bedpans in the hospital wing. Without magic!" He was breathing deeply, his fist clenched. "Why couldn't Black have hidden in Snape's office, eh? He could have finished him off for us!"

It was the day of the Quidditch match, Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. Harry was the seeker of the team, so Jade was excited to see him play. The weather was terrible--rain was pouring from the heavens and the wind was blowing strong gusts.

Madam Hooch, the referee, put her whistle to her lips and gave it a whistle that sounded shrill and distant and they were off.

Jade watched the players, entranced by the game, but knew she could never play; she was terribly afraid of heights.

"I'm going down there!" Hermione, who was standing next to Jade and Ron, yelled over the wind as Gryffindor called for a time-out.

"Okay!"

As the match continued, Hermione returned and the trio watched in horror as dementors began to come onto the field. A familiar wave of cold fell over Jade, and she heard heavy breathing, like from a horror movie. Like when the girl answers the phone and that's all she can hear.

And then, all Jade could remember was darkness.

Chapter 6

“Uhhh,” Jade moaned. Her head throbbed with every beat of her heart, and her eyelids felt heavy.

Jade tiredly opened her eyes to see a bright white ceiling. She curiously looked around and saw two people surrounding another twin-sized bed with white sheets. There was another person sitting next to her, with their head rested on their arms, which were folded on the bed.

“Keira,” Jade said softly, touching her gently on the elbow. Keira bolted up with wide eyes.

“Jade! You’re awake!” Keira exclaimed, throwing her arms around her. “Hermione, she’s awake!”

One of the people from the other bed stood and ran over to Jade. “Oh, Jade, I’m so happy you’re awake!” Hermione said happily.

“What happened?” said Jade, looking at the two girls.

“You fainted!” Hermione and Keira said at the same time. “You’ve been passed out for two days!” Hermione added.

“God, I can’t believe that I fainted!” said Jade. “What happened at the match?”

“We...,” Hermione lowered her voice, “we lost.”

“We lost?” said Jade loudly in shock, and both Keira and Hermione shushed her. Jade furrowed her eyebrows and looked past the two girls to the other bed. Harry was lying in the bed while Ron was sitting next to him.

“What happened?”

“Well, apparently, you’re not the only person who faints around the dementors,” Keira said. The two girls explained to Jade how Harry fainted and lost the match and his broom was destroyed.

“God, that must suck,” was all Jade could say.

It was relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where Jade was able to get out of the Hospital Wing and out in the open, even though she had to endure Draco Malfoy’s taunting.

Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor’s defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated having the full use of both arms again by doing spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom, which only angered Jade.

Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing dementor imitations across the dungeon; Jade and Ron both finally had enough and they both flung two large, slippery crocodile hearts at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

“If Snape’s teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I’m skiving off,” said Ron as they headed toward Lupin’s classroom after lunch.

“Amen to that,” Jade said, whose cheek had finally healed. “Check who’s in there, Hermione.”

Hermione peered around the classroom door.

“It’s okay!”

Professor Lupin was back at the work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes; nevertheless, he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape’s behavior while Lupin had been ill.

“It’s not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?”

“We don’t know anything about werewolves--”

“—two rolls of parchment!”

“Did you tell Professor Snape we haven’t covered them yet?” Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

“Yes, but he said we were really behind--”

“—he wouldn’t listen--”

“—*two rolls of parchment!*”

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

“Don’t worry. I’ll speak to Professor Snape. You don’t have to do the essay.”

“Oh *no*,” said Hermione, looking very disappointed. “I’ve already finished it!”

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought a glass box containing a hinkypunks, a little one-legged creature who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless-looking.

“Lures travelers into bogs,” said Professor Lupin as they took notes. “You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead—people follow the light—then--”

The hinkypunks made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry and Jade among them, but—

“Wait a moment, Harry, Jade,” Lupin called. “I’d like a word.”

Harry and Jade doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the hinkypunk’s box with a cloth.

“I heard about the match,” said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting pile books into his briefcase, “and I’m sorry about your broomstick, Harry. Is there any chance of fixing it?”

“No,” said Harry. “The tree smashed it to bits.”

Lupin sighed.

“They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance.”

“Did you hear about the dementors?” said Harry with difficulty.

Lupin looked at them quickly.

“Yes, I did. I don’t think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time...furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds...I suppose they were the reason you fell, Harry?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself. “*Why?* Why do they affect me like that? Am I just--”

“It has nothing to do with weakness,” said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry’s mind. “The dementors affect you, both of you, worse than the others because there are horrors in both of your pasts that the others don’t have.”

Harry looked curiously at Jade, but she avoided his eyes.

A ray of wintery sunlight fell across the sunlight, illuminating Lupin’s gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

“Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself...soulless and evil. You’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life.

And the worst that happened to *you*, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of.”

“When they get near me--” Harry stared hard at Lupin’s desk. “I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum.”

Jade sucked in her breath, not at the sound of Voldemort’s name, which she was not afraid of, but at what Harry must have heard.

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry’s shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment of silence, then—

“Why did they have to come to the match?” said Jade bitterly.

“They’re getting hungry,” said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. “Dumbledore won’t let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up...I don’t think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement...emotions running high...it was their idea of a feast.

“Azkaban must be terrible,” Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

“The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don’t need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they’re all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them mad within weeks.”

“But Sirius Black escaped from them,” Harry said slowly. “He got away...”

Lupin’s briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

“Yes,” he said, straightening up, “Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn’t have believed it possible...Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long...”

“*You* made that dementor on the train back off,” said Harry suddenly.

“There are—certain defenses one can use,” said Lupin. “But there was only one dementor on the train. The more there are, the more difficult it becomes to resist.”

“What defenses?” said Harry at once. “Can you teach me?”

“I don’t pretend to be an expert at fighting dementors, Harry...quite the contrary...”

“But if the dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them--”

Lupin looked into Harry’s determined face, hesitated, then said, “Well...all right. I’ll try and help. But it’ll have to wait until next term, I’m afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill. Jade, do you--,”

“No, thank you, Professor. You’ll have enough on your plate with teaching Harry.”

Two weeks before the end of term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Ron, Hermione, and Jade all had decided to remain at Hogwarts. Jade had no choice, because Heather had left on vacation to somewhere in Europe. Keira was going to her grandparents’ house, as she always did on vacations.

To everyone’s delight except Harry’s, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

“We can do all do our Christmas shopping there!” said Hermione. “Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Stringmints from Honeydukes!”

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Jade had decided to join Ron and Hermione, as Keira was sick with a cold and didn’t feel up to going.

Their first stop was Honeydukes, and they were looking for something to bring back to Harry. They were examining a tray of blood-flavored lollipops.

“Ugh, no, Harry won’t want one of these, they’re for vampires, I expect,” said Hermione.

“How about these?” said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clusters under Hermione’s nose.

“Definitely not,” came Harry’s voice from behind them.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

“*Harry!*” squealed Hermione. “What are you doing here? How—how did you-?”

“Wow!” said Ron, looking very impressed, “You’ve learned to Apparate!”

All Jade could do was stare in shock.

“Course I haven’t,” said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all about the Marauder’s Map.

“How come Fred and George never gave it to *me!*” said Ron, outraged. “I’m their brother!”

“But Harry isn’t going to keep it!” said Hermione, as though the idea was ludicrous. “He’s going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren’t you, Harry?”

“No, I’m not!” said Harry.

“Are you mad?” said Ron, giggling at Hermione. “Hand in something that good?”

“He’s right,” agreed Jade.

“If I hand it in, I’ll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it.”

“But what about Sirius Black?” Hermione hissed. “He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the castle! The teachers have got to know!”

“He can’t be getting in through a passage,” said Harry quickly. “There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George reckon Filch already knows about four of them. And of the other three—one of them is caved in, so no one can get through it. One of them is got the Whomping Willow planted over the entrance, so you can’t get out of it. And the one I just came through—well—it’s really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar, so unless he knew it was there...”

Harry hesitated. Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to a notice pasted on the inside of the sweetshop door.

-----By the order of-----

The Ministry of Magic

Customers are reminded that until further notice, dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night after sundown. This measure has been put in place for the safety of Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is therefore advisable that you complete your shopping well before nightfall.

Merry Christmas!

“See!” said Ron quietly. “I’d like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with dementors swarming all over the village. Anyway, Hermione, the Honeydukes owners would hear a break-in, wouldn’t they? They live over the shop!”

“Yes, but—but--” Hermione seemed to be struggling to find another problem. “Look, Harry still shouldn’t be coming into Hogsmeade. He hasn’t got a signed form! If anyone finds out, he’ll be in so much trouble! And it’s not nightfall yet—what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?”

“He’d have a job spotting Harry in this,” said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. “Come on, Hermione, it’s Christmas. Harry deserves a break.”

Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

“Are you going to report me?” Harry asked her, grinning.

“Oh—of course no—but, honestly, Harry--”

“Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?” said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. “And the Jelly Slugs? And the Acid Pops? Fred gave me one of those when I was seven—it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick.” Ron stared broodingly into the Acid Pop box. “Reckon Fred’d take a bit of Cockroach Cluster if I told him they were peanuts?”

When Ron, Jade, and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the four of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees.

They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind, Ron, Jade, and Hermione shouting through their scarves.

“That’s the post office--”

“Zonko’s is up there--”

“We could go up to the Shrieking Shack--”

“Tell you what,” said Ron, his teeth chattering, “shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?”

Jade was more than willing; the wind was fierce and her hands were freezing, so they crossed, and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlocks up at the bar.

“That’s Madam Rosmerta,” said Ron. “I’ll get the drinks, shall I,” he added, going slightly red.

Harry, Hermione, and Jade made their way to the back of the room, where there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree, which stood next to the fireplace. Ron came back five minutes later, carrying four foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

“Merry Christmas!” he said happily, raising his tankard.

Jade drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing she’d ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of her from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled her hair. The door of the Three Broomsticks had opened again. Jade looked over and gasped.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, who was deep in conversation with a portly man in a lime-green bowler hat and a pinstriped cloak—Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron, Hermione, and Jade placed their hands on top of Harry’s head and forced him off his stool and under the table.

As Fudge and Hagrid and the Professors walked towards the four third-years, Hermione whispered, “*Mobiliarbus!*”

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. Jade heard the grunts and sighs of the teachers and minister as they sat down.

An unfamiliar woman’s voice suddenly said, “A small gillywater--”

“Mine,” said Professor McGonagall’s voice.

“Four pints of mulled mead--”

“Ta, Rosmerta,” said Hagrid.

“A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella—”

“Mmm!” said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

“So you’ll be the red currant rum, Minister.”

“Thank you, Rosmerta, m’dear,” said Fudge’s voice. “Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won’t you? Come and join us...”

“So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?” came Madam Rosmerta’s voice after a short silence.

“What else, m’dear, but Sirius Black?” Fudge said in a quiet voice. “I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?”

“I did hear a rumor,” admitted Madam Rosmerta.

“Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?” said Professor McGonagall exasperatedly.

“Do you think Black’s still in the area, Minister?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“I’m sure of it,” said Fudge shortly.

“You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?” said Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. “Scared all my customers away...It’s very bad for business, Minister.”

“Rosmerta, m’dear, I don’t like them any more than you do,” said Fudge uncomfortably. “Necessary precaution...unfortunate, but there you are...I’ve just met some of them. They’re in a fury against Dumbledore—he won’t let them inside the grounds.”

“I should think not,” said Professor McGonagall sharply. “How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?”

“Hear, hear!” squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick.

“All the same,” demurred Fudge, “they are here to protect you all from something much worse...We all know what Black’s capable of...”

“Do you know, I still have trouble believing it,” said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. “Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I’d have thought...I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you’d told me then what he was going to become, I’d have said you’d had too much mead.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Rosmerta,” said Fudge gruffly. “The worst he did isn’t widely known.”

“The worst?” said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity. “Worse than murdering those poor people, you mean?”

“I certainly do,” said Fudge.

“I can’t believe that. What could possibly worse.”

“You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta,” murmured Professor McGonagall. “Do you remember who his best friend was?”

“Naturally,” said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. “Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here—ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!”

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

“Precisely,” said Professor McGonagall. “Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course—exceptionally bright, in fact—but I don’t think we’ve ever had such a pair of trouble makers--”

“I dunno,” chuckled Hagrid. “Fred and George Weasley could give ‘em a run fer their money.”

“You’d have thought Black and Potter were brothers!” chimed in Professor Flitwick. “Inseparable!”

“Of course they were,” said Fudge. “Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather

to Harry and--," Fudge lowered his voice, making Jade lean in closer, "—and to his sister."

"His sister?" said Madam Rosmerta in shock.

"Yes, Harry Potter has a sister. Twin sister, in fact," said Professor McGonagall. "They were separated after Lily and James were killed. But, with Black out in the open, Dumbledore decided that Jade Potter should attend Hogwarts, so she would be safe. "

Jade almost choked on her butterbeer.

"Dumbledore said that James and Lily, if anything happened to them, told him that they wanted Harry and Jade separated. He never gave a reason why, but he wanted to make sure they weren't close to each other. So, on the day of their death, Harry went to his aunt and uncle and Jade was shipped off to Lily's best friend in America, Heather Williams."

"Harry has no idea about both Jade and Black, of course. You can imagine how the idea about Black would devastate him."

"Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Worse even than that, m'dear..." Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. "Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who, was after of them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

"How does that work?" said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

"An immensely complex spell," he said squeakily, "involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper,

and is henceforth impossible to find—unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!”

“So Black was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall. “James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself...and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters’ Secret-Keeper himself.”

“He suspected Black?” gasped Rosmerta.

“He was sure somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements,” said Professor McGonagall darkly. “Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who.”

“But James Potter insisted on using Black?”

“He did,” said Fudge heavily. “And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been preformed--”

“Black betrayed them?” breathed Madam Rosmerta.

“He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters’ death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it--”

“Filthy, stickin’, turncoat!” Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

“Shh!” said Professor McGonagall.

“I met him!” growled Hagrid. “I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people. It was me what rescued Harry an’ Jade from Lily an’ James’s house after they was killed! Jus’ got ‘em outta the ruins, poor little things, with a great slash over Harry’s forehead, an’ their parents dead...an’ Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin’ motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin’ there. I didn’ know he’d bin Lily an’ James’s Secret-Keeper. Thought he’d jus’ heard the news o’ You-Know-Who’s attack an’ come ter see what he could do. White an’ shakin’, he was. An’ yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN’ TRAITOR!” Hagrid roared.

“Hagrid, please!” said Professor McGonagall. “Keep your voice down!”

“How was I ter know he wasn’ upset about Lily an’ James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou’! An’ then he says, ‘Give Harry an’ Jade ter me, Hagrid, I’m their godfather, I’ll look after them—‘Ha! But I’d had me orders from Dumbledore, an’ I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter his aunt an’ uncle’s and Jade was ter go ter Heather’s. Black argued, but in the end he gave in. Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry and Jade there. ‘I won’t need it anymore,’ he says.

“I shoulda known there was somethin’ fishy goin’ on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin it ter me for? Why wouldn’ he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. Dumbledore knew he’d bin the Potters’ Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin’ ter have ter run fer it that night, knew it was a matter o’ hours before the Ministry was after him.

“But what if I’d given Harry an’ Jade to him, eh? I bet he’d’ve pitched ‘em off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes’ friends’ son an’ daughter! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there’s nothin’ and no one that matters to ‘em anymore...”

A long silence followed after Hagrid’s story. Then Madam Rosmerta said, with some satisfaction, “But he didn’t manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him next day!”

“Alas, if only we had,” said Fudge bitterly. “It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew—another of the Potters’ friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters’ Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself.”

“Pettigrew...that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?” said Madam Rosmerta.

“Hero-worshipped Black and Potter,” said Professor McGonagall. “Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather sharp with him. You can imagine how I—how I regret that now...” She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

“There, now, Minerva,” said Fudge kindly, “Pettigrew died a hero’s death. Eyewitnesses—Muggles, of course, we wiped their memories later—told us how Pettigrew cornered Black. They say he was sobbing, ‘Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?’ And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens...”

Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, “Stupid boy...foolish boy...he was always hopeless at dueling...should have left it to the Ministry...”

“I tell yeh, if I’d got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn’t’ve messed around with wands—I’d’ve ripped him limb—from—limb,” Hagrid growled.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Hagrid,” said Fudge sharply. “Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law of Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those people. I—I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the sewer below. Bodies everywhere. Muggles screaming. And Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him...a heap of bloodstained clothes and a few—a few fragments--”

Fudge’s voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

“Well, there you have it, Rosmerta,” said Fudge thickly. “Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Black’s been in Azkaban ever since.”

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

“Is it true he’s mad, Minister?”

“I wish I could say that he was,” said Fudge slowly. “I certainly believe his master’s defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered and desperate man—cruel...pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban. You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there’s no sense in them...but I was shocked at how *normal* Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. It was unnerving. You’d have thought he was merely bored—asked if I’d finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the dementors seemed to be having on him—and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night.”

“But what do you think he’s broken out to do?” said Madam Rosmerta. “Good gracious, Minister, he isn’t trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?”

“I daresay that is his—er—eventual plan,” said Fudge evasively. “But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing...but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he’ll rise again...”

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

“You know, Cornelius, if you’re dining with the headmaster, we’d better head back up to the castle,” said Professor McGonagall.

Jade waited in breathless silence as the door of the Three Broomsticks opened again and there was another flurry of snow.

“Harry? Jade?”

Hermione was staring at Jade and Ron was staring at Harry, both lost for words.

Chapter 7

Jade had walked the entire way back to Hogwarts in silence, buried in her thoughts.

'Why hadn't Heather told me?' Jade thought angrily. 'Why didn't anybody tell me that my twin brother was Harry Potter, and that the reason my parents died was because their best friend had betrayed them?'

Ron and Hermione watched Harry and Jade nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits. Jade watched Harry sneak quietly up to his dormitory. Sighing, she walked up to her own dormitory and lay down on her twin sized bed.

The only thought that rang through her head as she fell asleep was, *'What am I going to do about Harry?'*

When Jade awoke, she saw the girl's dormitory was deserted and dressed in a purple tank top, jeans, and combat boots.

She was about to enter the common room, when she heard voices.

"Harry, listen," Hermione's voice said, "you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn't go doing anything stupid."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"Like trying to go after Black," said Ron sharply.

"You won't, will you, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Because Black's not worth dying for."

"D'you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me? I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort."

And if you'd heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget in a hurry."

Having heard enough, Jade marched down the stairs and into the Common Room.

"It doesn't matter, Harry," said Jade, sitting on the armchair across from him. "If you go against Black, you will be wasting everything Mom and Dad sacrificed for you."

Harry stared hard and cold at Jade and said, "You know nothing about what I'm going through--"

"I know exactly what you're going through," said Jade sharply, "because, guess what, Harry? I'm your twin sister, whether you like it or not. When I get close to the dementors, you want to know what I hear? I hear my foster mother about to be raped. So don't you dare give me this bull shit about me not knowing anything."

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously, flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's—let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him in ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron--"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black and Jade when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black and Jade Potter plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess," he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set--"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole (Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hems of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen—is that Fang?"

Jade, Harry, and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Jade nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there?"

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, and then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

"Yeh've heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry and Jade's necks.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry and Jade, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

"Hagrid, what *is* it?" said Jade and Hermione, both aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

“What’s this, Hagrid?”

Hagrid’s sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

“Well, that’s okay then, Hagrid!” said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee’s offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship...

There followed a list of the school governors.

“Oh,” said Ron. “But you said Buckbeak isn’t a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he’ll get off--”

“Yeh don’ know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o’ Dangerous Creatures!” chocked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “They’ve got it in fer interestin’ creatures!”

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid’s cabin made Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

"I couldn't leave him tied up out there in the snow," choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called "interesting creatures" and other people called "terrifying monsters." On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was positively cute.

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's massive forearm. "I'm sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe."

"Won't make no diff'rence," sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him. An' if I lose the case, Buckbeak--"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Jade.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them dementors outta the castle, an' Sirius Black lurkin around--"

Ron, Jade, and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, you just need a good defense. You call us witnesses--"

"I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the hippogriff got off. I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened."

"Me too, Hagrid," said Jade kindly.

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry, Jade, and Hermione looked at Ron to help him.

“Er—shall I make a cup of tea?” said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

“It’s what my mum does whenever someone’s upset,” Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, “Yer right. I an’ afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together...”

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and lain his head on Hagrid’s knee.

“I’ve not bin meself lately,” said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. “Worried abou’ Buckbeak, an’ no one likin’ me classes--”

“We do like them!” lied Hermione at once.

“Yeah, they’re great!” said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. “Er—how are the flobberworms?”

“Dead,” said Hagrid gloomily. “Too much lettuce.”

“Oh no!” said Ron, his lip twitching.

“An’ them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an’ all,” said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. “Gotta walk past ‘em ev’ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. ‘S like bein’ back in Azkaban--”

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione watched him with breathlessly. They had never heard him talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, “Is it awful there, Hagrid?”

“Yeh’ve no idea,” said Hagrid quietly. “Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin’ mad. Kep’ goin’ over horrible stuff in me mind...the day I got expelled from Hogwarts...day me dad died...day I had ter let Norbert go...”

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had won in a game of cards.

“Yeh can’ really remember who yeh are after a while. An’ yeh can’ see the point o’ livin’ at all. I used ter hope I’d jus’ die in me sleep...When they let me out, it was like bein’ born again, ev’ry thin’ came floodin’ back, it was the bes’ feelin’ in the world. Mind, the dementors weren’t keen on lettin’ me go.”

“But you were innocent!” said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

“Think that matters to them? They don’ care. Long as they’ve got a couple o’ hundred humans stuck there with ‘em, so they can leech all the happiness out of ‘em, they don’ give a damn who’s guilty an’ who’s not.”

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, “Thought o’ jus’ lettin’ Buckbeak go...tryin’ ter make him fly away...but how d’yeh explain ter a hippogriff it’s gotta go inter hidin’? An’—an’ I’m scared o’ breakin’ the law...” He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. “I don’ ever want ter go back ter Azkaban.”

The trip to Hagrid’s, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn’t brood constantly on revenge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, Jade and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The four of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

“Here’s something...there was a case in 1722... but the hippogriff was convicted—ugh, look what they did to it, that’s disgusting--”

“This might help, look—a mantichore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the mantichore off—oh—no, that was only because everyone was too scared to go near it...”

One night, when Ron and Hermione had gone to the library to get more books and return the useless ones, Jade and Harry were left alone in the common room.

“Listen, Harry, I know we haven’t talked about what happened in Hogsmeade--”

“We’ve talked about Black--”

“I’m not talking about Black,” said Jade. “I’m talking about the two of us being twins.”

“Oh,” was all Harry said.

“If you want, we can just forget about it and go on as if no one said anything about it--”

“Do you want that?” said Harry abruptly.

“No, of course not. Do you?” said Jade nervously.

“No, I don’t either.”

An awkward silence followed. Then, Jade spoke.

“So, I guess we should start over. Hello, Harry Potter. I’m your twin sister, Jade Potter,” said Jade, holding out her hand. Harry gave an odd look and smiled, grasping her hand.

“Hello, Jade Potter. I’m your twin brother, Harry Potter.”

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious light shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and

delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron's pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

Jade had confronted Professor McGonagall and told her that she had overheard her conversation in the Three Broomsticks'. McGonagall looked absolutely horrified, but Jade had reassured her that she had only told Harry about her being his twin. McGonagall agreed that they would be allowed to tell others, but not to tell anyone about Sirius Black.

On Christmas morning, Jade awoke to the sound of Hermione unwrapping her presents.

"Merry Christmas," Jade said sleepily, moving to her pile of presents.

"Merry Christmas!"

As Jade unwrapped her presents, she couldn't help but grin. She had gotten a bright green sweater, from Ron's mom, when made her feel warm and fuzzy inside, along with a dozen homemade mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle.

From Heather, she had gotten her Ipod, which, according to Heather, had a charm that would allow it to work in Hogwarts.

From Keira, she had gotten a bag of assorted Honeydukes chocolates, which Jade offered some to Hermione.

As Jade handed Hermione some of her chocolates, she noticed a dark wooden box at the bottom of her pile. Furrowing her eyebrows, she grabbed the box and opened it. She gasped at the sight.

Two beautiful rings were lying on a soft, silky, crimson cloth; one was silver, and had a large emerald surrounded by two smaller diamonds, while the other was silver as well, but had three sapphires with small diamonds separating them.

Wow," Hermione breathed from behind Jade. "Who is that from?"

"There's a note," Jade said, noticing the corner of a paper under the cloth. She grabbed it and read aloud:

Jade,

These were your mother's engagement and wedding ring. James and Lily would have wanted you to have them when you were older.

"There's no signature," said Jade, puzzled.

"Well, Dumbledore gave Harry his invisibility cloak. That was his dad's. Maybe Dumbledore's doing the same for you,"

"I don't know. Let's go ask Harry for the note if the writing looks like Dumbledore's," said Jade.

Jade and Hermione, who was holding a grumpy Crookshanks walked to the boys dormitory, where Harry and Ron were laughing about something.

"What're you two laughing about?" said Hermione.

"Don't bring him in here!" said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket. But Hermione wasn't listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus's empty bed and stared, along with Jade, at the Firebolt in Harry's hands.

"Oh, *Harry!* Who sent you *that?*"

"No idea," said Harry. "There wasn't a card or anything with it."

Hermione's face fell and bit her lip.

"What's the matter with you?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Hermione slowly, "but it's a bit odd, isn't it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn't it?"

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

"It's the best broom there is, Hermione," he said.

“So it must’ve been really expensive...”

“Probably cost more than all the Slytherins’ brooms put together,” said Ron.

“Well...who’d send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they’d sent it?” said Hermione.

“Who cares?” said Ron impatiently. “Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?”

“I don’t think anyone should ride that broom just yet!” said Hermione shrilly.

Harry, Ron, and Jade looked at her.

“What d’you think Harry’s going to do with it—sweep the floor?” said Ron.

“But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus’s bed, right at Ron’s chest.

“GET—HIM—OUT—OF—HERE!” Ron bellowed as Crookshanks’s claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry’s bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks’s fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tinny whistling was filling the room. A Pocket Sneakoscope had become dislodged from a pair of old, mustard-colored socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

“I forgot about that!” Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. “I never wear those socks if I can help it...”

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

"You'd better take that cat out of here," said Ron furiously, sitting Harry's bed nursing his toe. "Can't you shut that thing up?" he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks's yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

As Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back in the trunk, Jade took out the note and said, "Harry, do you recognize this handwriting?"

Harry read the note and said, puzzled, "No. Why do you ask?"

Jade sighed and said, "I got this as a present." She opened the wooden box and revealed the two rings. Harry and Ron goggled at the contents. "That was the only note left, and Hermione said Dumbledore gave you the Invisibility Cloak, so I thought--"

"That's weird," said Harry. "I mean, who else would have these? Maybe your foster mother?"

"Maybe," said Jade. "But wouldn't she sign the note?"

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh attack to eat Scabbers. Harry and Jade gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted themselves to examining the Firebolt. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn't say anything, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunch they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. Two extremely nervous-looking first years were the only other students.

“Merry Christmas!” said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione approached the table. “As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables...Sit down, sit down!”

Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

“Crackers!” said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch’s hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron and Jade’s eye and all three grinned; Snape’s mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard’s hat at once.

“Dig in!” he advised the table, beaming around.

As Jade was helping herself to some roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

“Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!” said Dumbledore, standing up.

“I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster,” said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, “and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the prompting of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and do I beg you to forgive my lateness...”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “Let me draw you up a chair--”

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

"I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen. Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to rise!"

"We'll risk it, Sibyll," said Professor McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Professor Trelawney hesitated, and then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

"Tripe, Sibyll?"

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor Lupin?"

"I'm afraid the poor is ill again," said Dumbledore, indication that everybody should start serving themselves. "Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day."

"But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva," she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous."

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him--"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

"I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney's conversation, "that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Then he should be up and about in no time...Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas? They're excellent."

The first-year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with trembling hands.

Professor Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting with Christmas dinner and still wearing their party hats, Harry and Ron got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

"My dears! Which of you left his seat first? Which?"

"Dunno," said Ron, looking uneasily at Harry.

"I doubt it will make much difference," said Professor McGonagall coldly, "unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the entrance hall."

Even Ron laughed. Professor Trelawney looked highly affronted.

"Coming?" Harry said to Hermione and Jade.

"No," Hermione muttered as Jade stood up, "I want a quick word with Professor McGonagall."

"Probably trying to see if she can take any more classes," yawned Ron as they made their way into the entrance hall, which was completely devoid of mad axe-men.

When they reached the portrait hole, they found Sir Cadogan enjoying a Christmas party with a couple monks, several previous

headmasters of Hogwarts, and his fat pony. He pushed his visor and toasted them with a flagon of mead.

“Merry—hic—Christmas! Password?”

“Scurvy cur,” said Ron.

“And the same to you, sir!” roared Sir Cadogan as the painting swung forward to admit them.

Jade went straight up to the dormitory, collected her rings and an antique silver necklace, and brought them downstairs. As she gently slid the rings onto the chain, Harry and Ron were working on the Firebolt, though there obviously nothing wrong with it. They both simply sat admiring it from every angle until the portrait hole opened, and Hermione came in, accompanied by Professor McGonagall.

Though Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor house, Jade had never seen her in the common room before. She stared at her, along with Harry and Ron. Hermione walked around them, sat down, picked up the nearest book, and hid her face behind it.

“So that’s it, is it?” said Professor McGonagall beadily, walking over to the fireside and staring at the Firebolt. “Miss Granger has informed me that you have been sent a broomstick, Potter.”

Harry, Ron, and Jade looked around at Hermione. They could see her forehead reddening over the top of her book, which was upside down.

“May I?” said Professor McGonagall, but she didn’t wait for an answer before pulling the Firebolt from Harry and Ron’s hands. She examined it carefully from handle to twig-ends. “Hmm. And there was no note at all, Potter? No card? No message of any kind?”

“No,” said Harry blankly.

“I see...,” said Professor McGonagall. “Well, I’m afraid I will have to take this, Potter.”

“W—what?” said Harry, scrambling to his feet. “Why?”

“It will need to be checked for jinxes,” said Professor McGonagall. “Of course, I’m no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down--”

“Strip it down?” repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

“It shouldn’t take more than a few weeks,” said Professor McGonagall. “You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it!” said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. “Honestly, Professor--”

“You can’t know that, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, “not until you’ve flown it, at any rate, and I’m afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed.”

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood, staring at her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands, and Jade could only watch him with pity in her heart. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

“What did you go running to McGonagall for?”

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

“Because I thought—and Professor McGonagall agrees with me—that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!”

Chapter 8

Three months passed, and Ron and Harry were still angry with Hermione. Jade, however, stayed neutral, as she understood both sides of the argument.

There was a match against Ravenclaw for the Gryffindor Quidditch team that was drawing nearer and nearer. Harry still hadn't bought a new broom, though. He was now asking Professor McGonagall for news of the Firebolt after every Transfiguration, Ron and Jade standing hopefully at his shoulder, Hermione rushing past with her face averted.

"No, Potter, you can't have it aback yet," Professor McGonagall told him the twelfth time this happened, before he'd opened his mouth. "We've checked for the usual curses, but Professor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall *tell* you once we've finished checking it. Now, please, stop badgering me."

The next day, Jade was sitting with Hermione, working on her homework, when she heard a loud commotion near the portrait hole. Curious, Jade looked up to see a group of people surrounding someone.

She was shocked to see Harry and Ron, who was holding the Firebolt, breaking away from the group and approaching the table. Hermione looked up.

"I got it back," said Harry, grinning at the two girls and holding up the Firebolt.

"We heard," Jade smirked.

"See, Hermione? There wasn't anything wrong with it!" said Ron.

"Well—there *might* have been," said Hermione. "I mean, at least you know now that it's safe!"

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Harry. "I'd better put it upstairs--"

“I’ll take it!” said Ron eagerly. “I’ve got to give Scabbers his rat tonic.”

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys’ staircase.

“Can I sit down, then?” Harry asked Hermione and Jade.

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, moving a great stack of parchment off a chair.

Jade watched Harry look around at the cluttered table, at the long Arithmancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the even longer Muggle Studies essay (“Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity”) and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

“How are you getting through all this stuff?” Harry asked her.

“Oh, well—you know—working hard,” said Hermione. Close-up, Jade could see that she looked almost as tired as Lupin.

“Why don’t you just drop a couple of subjects?” Jade asked, watching her lifting books as she searched for her rune dictionary.

“I couldn’t do that!” said Hermione, looking scandalized.

“Arithmancy looks terrible,” said Harry, picking up a very complicated-looking number chart.

“Oh no, it’s wonderful!” said Hermione earnestly. “It’s my favorite subject! It’s--”

But exactly what was wonderful about Arithmancy, Harry and Jade never found out. At that precise moment, a strangled yell echoed down the boys’ staircase. The whole common room fell silent, staring, petrified, at the entrance. Then came hurried footsteps, growing louder and louder—and then Ron came leaping into view, dragging with him a bed sheet.

“LOOK!” he bellowed, striding over to Hermione and Jade’s table. “LOOK!” he yelled, shaking the sheets in her face.

“Ron, what--?”

“SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!”

Hermione was leaning away from Ron, looking utterly bewildered. Harry and Jade looked down at the sheet Ron was holding. There was something red on it. Something that looked horribly like—

“BLOOD!” Ron yelled into the stunned silence. “HE’S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?”

“N—no,” said Hermione in a trembling voice.

Ron threw something down Hermione’s rune translation. Hermione, Jade, and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

It looked like the end of Ron and Hermione’s friendship. Each was so angry with the other that Harry and Jade couldn’t see how they’d ever make up.

Ron was enraged that Hermione had never taken Crookshanks’s attempts to eat Scabbers seriously, hadn’t bothered to keep a close enough watch on him, and was still trying to pretend that Crookshanks was innocent by suggesting that Ron look for Scabbers under all the boys’ beds. Hermione, meanwhile, maintained fiercely that Ron had no proof that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, that the ginger hairs might have been there since Christmas, and that Ron had been prejudiced against her cat ever since Crookshanks had landed on Ron’s head in the Magical Menagerie.

Personally, Harry was sure that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, and when he tried to point out to Hermione that the evidence all pointed that way, she lost her temper with Harry too.

“Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!” she said shrilly. “First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything’s my fault, isn’t it? Just leave me alone, Harry! I’ve got a lot of work to do!”

Jade, however, sided with Hermione. She figured that, logically, Hermione was right that Ron had no real proof that Scabbers was dead. Of course, Ron blew up when Jade voiced her opinions.

“THE CAT HAIRS WERE RIGHT NEXT TO THE BLOOD!” Ron roared angrily. “WHAT MORE EVIDENCE DO YOU WANT?”

It was now the day of the Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor match, and Jade was trying to get Hermione to go the game.

“Come on, Hermione! You need a major break! After the game, we’ll come right back and I’ll help you with your homework, how’s that sound?” Jade pleaded in the girls’ dormitory.

“Oh, fine!” Hermione sighed. “I just hope we don’t see Ron.”

“Don’t worry, Hermione,” Jade assured her. “I’ll make sure that you won’t even see Ron!”

Jade and Hermione sat in the stands, watching in interest as Lee Jordan was commentating.

“They’re off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to *Which Broomstick*, the Firebolt’s going to be the broom of choice for the national teams at this year’s World Championship--”

“Jordan, would you mind telling us what’s going on in the match?” interrupted Professor McGonagall’s voice.

“Right you are, Professor—just giving a bit of background information—the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in auto-brake and--”

“Jordan!”

“Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor heading for goal...”

Jade watched Harry streak past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, was tailing him closely.

Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Ravenclaw goal posts and Chang fell behind.

Just as Katie Bell succeeded in scoring the first goal of the match, Harry dived toward the ground, obviously sighting the Snitch.

Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelting at Harry, who had to veer off course, avoiding it by an inch. The Snitch had vanished.

There was a great “Ooooooh” of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beater from the Ravenclaw end. George Weasley vented his feelings by hitting the second Bludger directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

“Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter’s really putting it through its paces now, see it turn—Chang’s Comet is just no match for it, the Firebolt’s precision-balance is really noticeable in these long--”

“JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIREBOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY?”

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead—if Chang got the Snitch before Harry, Ravenclaw would win.

Harry suddenly accelerated again, but Chang blocked him.

He dived again, and Chang, thinking he’d seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she hurtled downward; he rose fast as a bullet once more and accelerated over to the Ravenclaw end.

Jade had the urge to look at the grounds.

Three dementors, three tall, black, hooded dementors, were looking up at Harry.

Jade watched Harry plunge a hand down the neck of his robes and whip out his wand, roaring, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. Harry ignored this, however, and managed to close his fingers over the small, struggling Snitch.

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. The match was over; Gryffindor had won and was going to the Quidditch finals.

Jade and Hermione were both sitting in a corner, Hermione reading *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles* while Jade was reading *New Moon*. A huge party was going on around them, but the two third-years ignored it.

"Did you two even come to the match?" Harry's voice interrupted their thoughts.

"Of course we did," said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. "And I'm very glad we won, and I think you did really well, but I need to finish this by Monday."

"Yeah, and I just don't like parties," said Jade, giving Harry a small smile.

"Come on and have some food," Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in a good enough mood to bury the hatchet.

"I can't, Harry. I've still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!" said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical. "Anyway..." She glanced over at Ron too. "*He* doesn't want me to join in."

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly, "If Scabbers hadn't just been *eaten*, he could have had some of those Fudge Flies. He used to really like them--"

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry or Jade could say or do anything, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and, still sobbing, ran toward the staircase to the girls' dormitories and out of sight.

“Can you hold this?” said Jade in a calm voice, handing him her book.

Jade calmly walked over to Ron, who had his back to her. She tapped him on the shoulder and waited patiently as he turned around. Then, she pulled back her fist and punched him in the stomach. “You just made a big mistake,” Jade muttered as he bent over, clutching his stomach. Then, she turned around and took her book from a star-struck Harry and walked up the staircase with a calm face.

Hermione was all alone, sobbing on her bed with her book next to her.

“Oh, Hermione,” said Jade with pain in her voice. “Don’t listen to him.”

“He’s right, though,” sobbed Hermione. “I’ve lost my best friend!”

Jade sighed and pulled Hermione into a hug. “Shh,” she whispered into her ear as Hermione sobbed into her shoulder. “If it helps, I punched Ron in the stomach for being a moron.”

Hermione let a watery laugh and said, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s strange, I’m not even sorry.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHH!
NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Jade sprang from her bed and looked around wildly. Everyone was sitting up too, including Hermione. “What was that?” said Lavender. All the girls got up and walked down to the common room.

“Are you *sure* you weren’t dreaming, Ron?”

“I’m telling you, I saw him!”

“What’s all the noise?”

“Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!”

A group of kids were in the common room, including Harry and Ron.

“Everyone back upstairs!” said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajamas as he spoke.

“Perce—Sirius Black!” said Ron faintly. “In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!”

The common room went very still.

“Nonsense!” said Percy, looking startled. “You had too much to eat, Ron—had a nightmare--”

“I’m telling you--”

“Now, really, enough’s enough!”

Professor McGonagall was here. She slammed the portrait behind her as she entered the common room and stared furiously around.

“I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!”

“I certainly didn’t authorize this, Professor!” said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. “I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare--”

“IT WASN’T A NIGHTMARE!” Ron yelled. “PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!”

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?”

“Ask him!” said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan’s picture. “Ask him if he saw--”

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room listened with bated breath.

“Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?”

“Certainly, good lady!” cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the common room.

“You—you *did*?” said Professor McGonagall. “But—but the password!”

“He had ‘em!” said Sir Cadogan proudly. “Had the whole week’s, my lady! Read ‘em off a little piece of paper!”

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

“Which person,” she said, her voice shaking, “which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week’s passwords and left them lying around?”

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy-slippered toes, raised his hand slowly into the air.

Chapter 9

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House stayed awake in the common room, waiting to hear whether Black had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching the front doors to recognize a large picture of Sirius Black; Filch was suddenly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. Sir Cadogan had been fired. His portrait had been taken back to its lonely landing on the seventh floor, and the Fat Lady was back. She had been expertly restored, but was still extremely nervous, and had agreed to return to her job only on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They paced the corridor in a menacing group, talking in grunts and comparing the size of their clubs.

Neville was a total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furious with him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade visits, given him a detention, and forbidden anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in, while the security trolls leered unpleasantly at him.

A large group of people were bunched around the bulletin board a week after Black's break in.

"Hogsmeade, next weekend," Jade heard Ron say to Harry. "What d'you reckon?"

"Well, Filch hasn't done anything about the passage into Honeydukes," said Harry quietly.

"Harry!" said Hermione.

"Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again...I'll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!" said Jade angrily.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry?" growled Ron, not looking at Hermione or Jade.

"Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black did to *you*! We mean it, we'll tell--"

"So now you're trying to get Harry expelled?" said Ron furiously. "Haven't you two done enough damage this year?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one frightened look at the expression on Ron's face, gathered up Crookshanks, and hurried away toward the girls' dormitories.

Sighing, Jade stood and grabbed Ron's collar and pulled him close to her, hissing, "If you are going to allow yourself to lose a friendship over an old rat, you are more pathetic than I thought."

With that, she threw him away from her and stormed up to her dormitory.

Dear Hermione and Jade,

We lost. I'm allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts.

Execution date to be fixed.

Beaky has enjoyed London.

I won't forget all the help you two have given us.

Hagrid.

Jade stared at the letter in shock, along with Harry and Ron, who had just gotten back from Hogsmeade.

"They can't do this," said Harry. "They can't. Buckbeak isn't dangerous."

“Malfoy’s dad frightened the Committee into it,” said Hermione, wiping the tears from her eyes. “You know what he’s like. They’re a bunch of doddering old fools, and they were scared. There’ll be an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can’t see any hope...Nothing will have changed.”

“Yeah, it will,” said Ron fiercely. “You two won’t have to do all the work by yourselves this time. I’ll help.”

“Oh, Ron!”

Hermione flung her arms around Ron’s neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her awkwardly on the top of the head. Finally, Hermione drew away.

“Ron, I’m really, really sorry about Scabbers....,” she sobbed.

“Oh—well—he was old,” said Ron, looking thoroughly relieved that she had let go of him. “And he was a bit useless. You never know, Mum and Dad might get me and owl now.”

“Yeah, and, Ron, sorry about that punch. I have a bit of a bad temper,” said Jade, giving him a sheepish smile.

“Forget it.”

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black’s second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Jade, Ron, and Hermione to go and visit Hagrid in the evenings. Their only chance of talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

“S’all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin’ there in black robes an’ I kept droppin’ me notes and forgettin’ all them dates yeh two looked up fer me. An’ then Lucius Malfoy stood up an’ said his bit, and the Committee jus’ did exac’ly what he told ‘em...”

“There’s still the appeal!” said Ron fiercely. “Don’t give up yet, we’re working on it!”

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle, and kept looking back, laughing derisively.

“S’no good, Ron,” said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. “That Committee’s in Lucius Malfoy’s pocket. I’m jus’ gonna make sure the rest o’ Beaky’s time is the happiest he’s ever had. I owe him that...”

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

“Look at him blubber!”

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

“Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?” said Malfoy. “And he’s supposed to be our teacher!”

Harry, Ron, and Jade made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first—SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Jade, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

“Don’t you *dare* call Hagrid pathetic, you foul—you evil--”

“Hermione!” said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

“Get *off*, Ron!”

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

“C’mon,” Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

“*Hermione!*” Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

“Harry, you’d better beat him in the Quidditch final!” Hermione said shrilly. “You just better had, because I can’t stand it if Slytherin wins!”

“We’re due in Charms,” said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. “We’d better go.”

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick’s classroom.

“You’re late!” said Professor Flitwick reprovingly as Harry opened the classroom door. “Come along, quickly, wands out, we’re experimenting with Cheering Charms today, we’ve already divided into pairs--”

Harry, Jade, and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

“Where’s Hermione gone?”

Harry and Jade looked around too. Hermione hadn’t entered the classroom, yet Jade knew she had been right next to Harry when she had opened the door.

“That’s weird,” said Harry, staring at Ron and Jade. “Maybe—maybe she went to the bathroom or something?”

But Hermione didn’t turn up all lesson.

“She could’ve done with a Cheering Charm on her too,” said Ron as the class left for lunch, all grinning broadly—the Cheering Charms had left them with a feeling of great contentment.

Hermione wasn’t at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charms were wearing off, and Jade, Harry, and Ron had started to get slightly worried.

“You don’t think Malfoy did something to her?” Jade said anxiously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password ("Flibberigibbet"), and scrambled through the portrait hole into the common room.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on either side of her. Jade prodded her awake.

"Wh—what?" said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. "Is it time to go? W—which lesson have we got now?"

"Divination, but it's not for another twenty minutes," said Harry. "Hermione, why didn't you come to Charms?"

"What? Oh no!" Hermione squeaked. "I forgot to go to Charms!"

"But how could you forget?" said Jade. "You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!"

"I don't believe it!" Hermione wailed. "Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I lost track of things!"

"You know what, Hermione?" said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a pillow. "I reckon you're cracking up. You're trying to do too much."

"No, I'm not!" said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. "I just made a mistake, that's all! I'd better go and see Professor Flitwick and say sorry...I'll see you in Divination!"

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawney's classroom twenty minutes later, looking extremely harassed.

"I can't believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might!"

Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of pearly white mist.

Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione sat down together at the same rickety table.

"I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next term," Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney, in case she was lurking nearby.

"Don't complain, this means we've finished palmistry," Harry muttered back. "I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands."

"Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Parvati and Lavender quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

"I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned," said Professor Trelawney, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. "The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Hermione and Jade snorted.

"Well, honestly...the fates have informed her'...who sets the exam?"

"She does! What an amazing prediction," Jade and Hermione said, not troubling to keep their voices low. Harry and Ron choked back laughs.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them, as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, however, as though she had not.

"Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," she said dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes"—Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the noise—"so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class."

And so they began. Jade, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep her mind empty when thoughts such as “this is stupid” kept drifting across it. It didn’t help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

“Seen anything yet?” Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour’s quiet crystal gazing.

“Yeah, there’s a burn on this table,” said Ron, pointing.

“Someone’s spilled their candle,” Jade added.

“This is such a waste of time,” Hermione hissed. “I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Cheering Charms--”

Professor Trelawney rustled past.

“Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?” she murmured over the clinking of her bangles.

“I don’t need help,” Ron whispered. “It’s obvious what this means. There’s going to be loads of fog tonight.”

Harry, Hermione, and Jade started laughing.

“Now, really!” said Professor Trelawney as everyone’s heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking scandalized. “You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!” She approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Jade rolled her eyes and prepared for what was coming—

“There is something here!” Professor Trelawney whispered, lowering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses. “Something moving...but what is it?”

Jade rolled her eyes back into her head and mouthed, *Oh, my God!*

“My dear...,” Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. “It is here, plainer than ever before...my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer...the Gr--”

“Oh, for *goodness*’ sake,” said Hermione loudly. “Not that ridiculous Grim *again!*”

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione’s face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and they both glared at Hermione too. Professor Trelawney stood up, surveying Hermione with unmistakable anger.

“I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, my *dear*, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don’t remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then—

“Fine!” said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming *Unfogging the Future* back into her bag. “Fine!” she repeated, swinging the bag over her shoulder and almost knocking Ron off his chair. “I give up! I’m leaving!”

And to the whole class’s amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder out of sight.

It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Professor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the Grim. She turned abruptly from Harry and Ron’s table, breathing rather heavily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

“Ooooo!” said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. “Ooooo, Professor Trelawney, I’ve just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn’t you? ‘*Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!*’ You said it ages ago, Professor!”

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

“Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have mistaken the Signs...The Inner Eye can be a burden, you know...”

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table instead.

“Some day Hermione’s having, eh?” Ron muttered to Harry and Jade, looking awed.

“Yeah...”

Jade watched curiously as Harry glanced into the crystal ball. She knew exactly what her brother was thinking. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim again?

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom seemed close to a nervous collapse, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Call this a holiday!” Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. “The exams are ages away, what’re they playing at?”

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Divination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She was usually last to leave the common room at night, first to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin’s under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron and Jade had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak’s appeal. When they weren’t doing their own work, they were poring over enormously thick volumes with names like *The Handbook of Hippogriff Psychology* and *Fowl or Foul? A Study of Brutality*. Ron was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks.

Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quidditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions of tactics with Oliver Wood, the team captain. The Gryffindor-Slytherin match would take place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was leading the tournament by exactly two hundred points. The meant (as Wood constantly reminded his team) that they needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden of winning fell largely on Harry, because capturing the Snitch was worth one hundred and fifty points.

The whole of Gryffindor house was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn’t won the Quidditch Cup since the legendary Charlie Weasley (Ron’s second oldest brother) had been Seeker. But Harry

doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Harry and Malfoy was at its highest point ever. Malfoy was still smarting about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way out of punishment. Harry hadn't forgotten Malfoy's attempt to sabotage him in the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buckbeak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy in front of the entire school.

Never, in anyone's memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays were over, tension between the two teams and their Houses was at the breaking point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor fourth year and a Slytherin sixth year ended up in the hospital wing with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn't walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and trying to trip him out; Crabbe and Goyle kept popping wherever he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him surrounded by people. Wood had given instructions that Harry should be accompanied everywhere he went, in case the Slytherins tried to put him out of action. The whole of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that it was impossible for Harry to get to classes on time because he was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he wasn't flying it, he locked it securely in his trunk and frequently dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still here.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had put down her books.

"I can't work. I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing with the pressure by being louder and exuberant than ever. Oliver Wood was crouched over a model of Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with his wand and muttering to

himself. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were laughing at Fred and George's jokes. Harry was sitting with Ron, Jade, and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because every time he did, he had the horrible sensation that something very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a *Firebolt!*" said Ron.

"I've never seen a better Seeker," said Jade kindly, smiling nervously.

"Yeah...", said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Jade woke up at 5:00 AM, not being able to sleep. Sighing softly, she silently dressed:

She walked down to the empty common room and slumped into a comfy armchair with Linkin Park's *Faint* blaring in her ears.

I can't feel the way I did before

Don't turn your back on me

I won't be ignored

Time won't heal this damage anymore

Don't turn your back on me

I won't be ignored

When someone tapped her on the shoulder, she spun around and swung her fist blindly. As the person ducked out of the way, Jade realized it was George Weasley.

"Jade, relax! It's only me!" said George, staring at her in shock.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry!” said Jade, peeling off her earphones and throwing them on the armchair. “I didn’t hit you, did I?”

“No, just missed,” said George, “You were close, though.”

“I’m so, so sorry,” said Jade.

“What are you doing up?” said George curiously.

“Couldn’t sleep. You?”

“Same thing. Just kind of nervous about the match,” he admitted, sitting on the couch in front of the empty fire place. Jade looked at him in concern and suddenly got an idea.

“I have an idea,” she said and walked behind the back of the couch, putting her hands on his shoulder. She gently massaged his shoulders, kneading out all of the tension.

“Wow. That...that feels really good,” said George, turning around to face. “Thanks.” Jade gave him a small smile of encouragement.

“No problem.”

Jade watched the Gryffindor team walk out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Three-quarters of the crowd was wearing scarlet rosettes, waving scarlet flags with the Gryffindor lion upon them, or brandishing banners with slogans like “GO GRYFFINDOR!” and “LIONS FOR THE CUP!” Behind the Slytherin goal posts, however, two hundred people were wearing green; the silver serpent Slytherin glittered on their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very row, wearing green like everyone else, and a very grim smile.

“And here are the Gryffindors!” yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. “Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spinnet, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years--”

Lee’s comments were drowned by a tide of “boos” from the Slytherin end.

“And here comes the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He’s made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill--”

More boos from the Slytherin crowd.

“Captains, shake hands!” said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other’s hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other’s fingers.

“Mount your brooms!” said Madam Hooch. “Three...two...one...”

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Jade felt excitement and nervousness fill her stomach.

“And it’s Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinnet of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no—Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing up the field—WHAM!—nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it’s caught by—Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina—nice swerve around Montague—*duck, Angelina, that’s a Bludger!*—SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming in delight—

“OUCH!”

Angelina was nearly thrown off from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

“Sorry!” said Flint as the crowd below booed, Jade included. “Sorry, didn’t see her.”

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater’s club at the back of Flint’s head. Flint’s nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

“That will do!” shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between them. “Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to *their* Chaser!”

“Come off it, Miss!” howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

“Come on, Alicia!” yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. “YES! SHE’S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Jade turned her head sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched.

“Course, Wood’s a superb Keeper!” Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch’s whistle. “Superb! Very difficult to pass—very difficult indeed—YES! I DON’T BELIEVE IT! HE’S SAVED IT!”

Relieved, Jade watched Harry zoom away, gazing around for the Snitch.

“Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession—no!—Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she’s streaking up the field—THAT WAS DELIBERATE!”

Montague, a Slytherin chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie cart-wheeled in the air, managed to stay on her broom, but dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, Katie had put another penalty past the Slytherin Keeper.

“THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING--”

“Jordan, if you can’t commentate in an unbiased way--!”

“I’m telling it like it is, Professor!”

Harry suddenly pulled his Firebolt around and sped off toward the Slytherin end. Malfoy went haring after him, clearly thinking Harry had seen the Snitch there...

WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry’s right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again—

WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Bole and Derrick zoomed toward Harry, clubs raised—

He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

“Ha haaa!” yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. “Too bad, boys! You’ll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebolt! And it’s Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson take the Quaffle—Flint alongside her—poke him in the eye, Angelina!—it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke—oh no—Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save--!”

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to tug the magical megaphone away from him.

“Sorry, Professor, sorry! Won’t happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession--”

It was turning into the dirtiest game Jade had ever seen. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, the Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he’d though she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the face in retaliation. Madam Hooch

awarded both teams penalties, and Wood pulled off another spectacular save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it—once Gryffindor was fifty points ahead—

Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swooping around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Bole and Derrick took advantage of Fred's and George's absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself.

"YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked as Bole and Derrick. "Gryffindor penalty!"

And Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, Fred Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle out of his hands; Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal—seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd was screaming itself hoarse—Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught the Snitch now, the cup was theirs.

Harry suddenly put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears; he stretched out his hand, but suddenly, the Firebolt was slowing down-- Horrified, he looked around. Malfoy had thrown himself forward, grabbed hold of the Firebolt's tail, and was pulling it back.

Harry looked angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics!" Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Malfoy was sliding back onto his Nimbus Two Thousand and One.

“YOU CHEATING SCUM!” Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing out of the Professor McGonagall’s reach. “YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B—”

Professor McGonagall didn’t even bother to tell him off. She was actually shaking her finger in Malfoy’s direction, her hat had fallen off, and she too was shouting furiously.

“Slytherin scum,” Jade muttered to Hermione and Ron, who were both screaming angrily.

Alicia took Gryffindor’s penalty, but she was so angry she missed by several feet. The Gryffindor team was losing concentration and the Slytherins, delighted by Malfoy’s foul on Harry, were being spurred on to greater heights.

“Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal—Montague scores--” Lee groaned. “Seventy-twenty to Gryffindor...”

Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn’t going to let Malfoy anywhere near the Snitch...

“Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!”

Jade’s eyes widened in anger at the sight before her.

Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, including the Slytherin Keeper—they were all going to block her—

Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet, he shot toward the Slytherins.

“AAAAAAARRRGH!”

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina’s way was clear.

“SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor leads by eighty points to twenty!”

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

And then Jade saw something that made her heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face.

Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead—

He was gaining on Malfoy—Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Bole sent a Bludger at him—he was at Malfoy’s ankles—he was level—

Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy’s arm out of the way and—

“YES!”

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Hermione threw her arms around Jade and Ron, and they all screamed with the other Gryffindors.

Chapter 10

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be celebrating: as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry, and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the hall.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating while enticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been spotted working; they were about to take their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests), the highest qualifications Hogwarts offered. As Percy hoped to enter the Ministry of Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who disturbed the quiet of the common room in the evenings. In fact, the only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry, Ron, and Jade had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't restrain themselves when they saw the exam schedule she had drawn up for herself. The first column read:

Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

“Hermione?” Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. “Er—are you sure you’ve copied down these times right?”

“What?” snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. “Yes, of course I have.”

“Is there any point in asking you how you’re going to sit for two exams at once?” said Harry.

“No,” said Hermione shortly. “Have any of you seen my copy of *Numerology and Gramatica*?”

“Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading,” said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of parchment around on her table, looking for the book. Just then, there was a rustle at the window and Hedwig fluttered through it, a note clutched tight in her beak.

“It’s from Hagrid,” said Harry, ripping the note open. “Buckbeak’s appeal—it’s set for the sixth.”

“That’s the day we finish our exams,” said Hermione, still looking everywhere for her Arithmancy book.

“And they’re coming up here to do it,” said Harry, still reading from the letter. “Someone from the Ministry of Magic and—and an executioner.”

Hermione and Jade looked up, startled.

“They’re bringing the executioner to the appeal! But that sounds as though they’ve already decided!”

“Yeah, it does,” said Harry slowly.

“They can’t!” howled Ron. “Jade and I have spent ages reading up on stuff for him; they can’t just ignore it all!”

But Jade had a horrible feeling that the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures had had its mind made up for it by Mr. Malfoy.

Draco, who had been noticeably subdued since Gryffindor's triumph in the Quidditch final, seemed to regain some of his old swagger over the next few days. From sneering comments Jade overheard, Malfoy was certain Buckbeak was going to be killed, and seemed thoroughly pleased with himself for bringing it about. Jade, not being able to control her temper, had slammed her fist into Malfoy's face when she heard him muttering about Hagrid to his gang. This had given her detention for a whole week from Snape.

And the worst thing of all was that they had no time or opportunity to go and see Hagrid, because the strict new security measures had not been lifted, and Harry didn't dare retrieve his Invisibility Cloak from below the one-eyed witch.

Exam week began and an unnatural hush fell over the castle. The third years emerged from Transfiguration at lunchtime on Monday, limp and ashen-faced, comparing results and bemoaning the difficulty of the tasks they had been set, which had included turning a teapot into a tortoise. Hermione irritated the rest by fussing about how her tortoise had looked more like a turtle, which was the least of everyone else's worries.

"Mine still had a spout for a tail, what a nightmare..."

"Were the tortoises *supposed* to breathe steam?"

"It still had a willow-patterned shell, d'you think that'll count against me?"

Then, after a hasty lunch, it was straight back up stairs for the Charms exam. Hermione had been right; Professor Flitwick did indeed test them on Cheering Charms. Jade and Hermione did theirs perfectly, both being very calm.

After dinner, the students hurried back to their common rooms, not to relax, but to start studying for Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Astronomy.

Hagrid presided over the Care of Magical Creatures exam the following morning with a very preoccupied air indeed; his heart didn't seem to be in it at all. He had provided a large tub of fresh

flobberworms for the class, and told them that to pass the test, their flobberworms had to be alive at the end of one hour. As flobberworms flourished best if left to their own devices, it was the easiest exam any of them had ever taken, and also gave Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione plenty of opportunity to speak to Hagrid.

“Beaky’s gettin’ a bit depressed,” Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking Harry’s flobberworms was still alive. “Bin cooped up too long. But still...we’ll know what day after tomorrow—one way or another--”

They had Potions that afternoon, which went pretty well. Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Jade wrote everything she knew about medieval witch-hunts. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sun burnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the most unusual exam any of them had ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle a new boggart.

Harry and Jade did marvelous on everything and watched Ron and Hermione.

Ron did very well until he reached the hinkypunk, which successfully confused him into sinking waist-high into the trunk with the boggart in it. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the boggart in it. After about a minute inside it, she burst out again, screaming.

“Hermione!” said Lupin, startled. “What’s the matter?”

“P—P—Professor McGonagall!” Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. “Sh—she said I’d failed everything!”

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, Jade, and Ron went back to the castle. Ron was slightly inclined to laugh at Hermione's boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them at the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of Harry.

"Hello there, Harry!" he said. "Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?"

"Yes," said Harry. Hermione, Jade, and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the background.

"Lovely day," said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake. "Pity...pity..."

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

"I'm here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness to the execution of a mad hippogriff. As I needed to visit Hogwarts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in."

"Does that mean the appeal's already happened?" Ron interrupted, stepping forward.

"No, no, it's scheduled for this afternoon," said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

"Then why do you need to witness an execution? The hippogriff might get off!" said Jade angrily.

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be withering before their very eyes; the other was tall and strapping, with a thin black mustache. Jade gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, because the very old wizard squinted toward Hagrid's castle and said in a feeble

voice, "Dear, dear, I'm getting too old for this...Two o'clock, isn't it Fudge?"

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Jade looked and saw that he was running one broad thumb along the blade of a shining axe. Ron and Jade both opened their mouths to say something, but Hermione nudged both of them hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

"Why'd you stop us?" said Jade angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch.

"Did you see them? They've even got the axe ready! This isn't justice!" Ron continued.

"Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can't go saying things like that to his boss!" said Hermione, but she too looked very upset. "As long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argues his case properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak..."

But Jade could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate lunch, happily anticipating the end of the exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry's, Ron's and Jade's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together; Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry, Ron, and Jade proceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom, trying to cram in a bit of last-minute studying.

"She's seeing us separately," Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of *Unfogging the Future* open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal gazing. "Have any of you ever seen *anything* in a crystal ball?" he asked them unhappily.

"Nope," said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Jade knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak's appeal started.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, "What did she ask? Was it okay?"

But they all refused to say.

"She says the crystal ball's told her that if I tell you, I'll have a horrible accident!" squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the ladder toward Harry, Jade, and Ron, who had now reached the landing.

"That's convenient," snorted Ron. "You know, I'm starting to think Hermione was right about her"—he jabbed his thumb toward the trapdoor overhead—"she's a right old fraud."

"Yeah," said Harry, looking at his watch. Jade glanced at her own. It was now two o'clock. "Wish she'd hurry up..."

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

"She says I've got all the makings of a true Seer," she informed Harry, Ron, and Jade. "I saw *loads* of stuff...Well, good luck!"

She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

"Ronald Weasley," said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and Jade and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry and Jade were the only people left to be tested. They settled themselves on the floor with their backs against the wall.

Finally, after about twenty moments, Ron's large feet reappeared on the ladder.

"How'd it go?" Jade asked him, her and Harry standing up.

"Rubbish," said Ron. "Couldn't see a thing, so I made some stuff up. Don't think she was convinced, though..."

"Meet you in the common room," Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney's voice called, "Jade Potter!"

"Wish me luck," said Jade as she climbed up the silver ladder.

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent made Jade cough as she stumbled through the clutter of chairs and tables to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for her before a large crystal ball.

“Good day, my dear,” she said softly. “If you would kindly gaze into the Orb...Take your time, now...then tell me what you see within it...”

Jade bent over the crystal ball and stared, started as hard as she could, willing it to show her something other than swirling white fog, but nothing happened.

“Well?” Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. “What do you see?”

The heat was overpowering and her nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside them. She thought of what Ron said, and decided to pretend.

“I see a woman and a man,” said Jade.

“Who are these people?” whispered Professor Trelawney.

“I don’t know. The woman has long blonde hair and has really pointy teeth. The man has long black hair and they both look...happy.”

“Anything else?”

“No—er—sorry,” said Jade.

Professor Trelawney sighed.

“Well, dear, I think we’ll leave it there...A little disappointing...but I’m sure you did your best.”

Jade sat at a table in the corner with Ron and Hermione, not believing what she was reading. She looked up when she heard the portrait hole open and Harry ran over to them.

“Professor Trelawney,” Harry panted, “just told me--”

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

“Buckbeak lost,” said Ron weakly. “Hagrid’s just sent this.”

Hagrid’s note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote that it was hardly legible.

Lost appeal. They’re going to execute at sunset. Nothing you can do. Don’t come down. I don’t want you to see it.

Hagrid.

“We’ve got to go,” said Harry at once. “He can’t just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!”

“Sunset, though,” said Ron, who was staring out the window in a glazed sort of way. “We’d never be allowed...’specially you, Harry...”

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

“If we only had the Invisibility Cloak...”

“Where is it?” said Hermione.

Harry told her and Jade about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

“...if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I’m in serious trouble,” he finished.

“That’s true,” said Hermione, getting to her feet. “If he sees *you*...How do you open the witch’s hump again?”

“You—you tap it and say, ‘*Dissendium*,’” said Harry. “But--”

Hermione didn’t wait for the rest of the sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady’s portrait and vanished from sight.

“She hasn’t gone to get it?” Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery cloak folded carefully under her robes.

“Hermione, I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately!” said Ron, astounded. “First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out on Professor Trelawney--”

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the cloak hidden down the front of his robes; he had to keep his arms folded to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, listening, until they were sure it was deserted. They heard a last pair of people of people hurrying across the hall and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

“Okay,” she whispered, “no one there—cloak on--”

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the cloak, then walked down the stone front steps into the grounds. The sun was sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gliding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid’s cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for his visitor, pale-faced and trembling.

“It’s us,” Harry hissed. “We’re wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off.”

“Yeh shouldn’ve come!” Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly and Harry pulled off the cloak.

Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he was or what to do. This helplessness was worse to watch than tears.

“Wan’ some tea?” he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

“Where’s Buckbeak, Hagrid?” said Hermione hesitantly.

"I—I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pumpkin patch. Thought he oughta see the trees an'—an' smell fresh air—before--"

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over with Jade and they both started cleaning up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked back hopelessly.

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore--"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared...Yeh know what Lucius Malfoy...threatened 'em...an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an' old pal o' Malfoy's...but it'll be quick an' clean...an' I'll be beside him..."

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it—while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter—ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore..."

Hermione who had been rummaging through Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug with Jade, let a small, quickly stifled sob. She straightened up with the new jug in her hands, fighting back tears.

"We'll stay with you, too, Hagrid," Jade began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway...If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Harry, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione and Jade's face, but they hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. Then, as Hermione picked up the milk bottle to pour some into the jug, she let out a shriek.

"Ron! I—I don't believe it—it's *Scabbers*!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling to get back inside, Scabbers the rat came sliding out onto the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever, large tufts of hair had fallen out leaving wide bald patches, and he writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself.

"It's okay, Scabbers!" said Ron. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

"They're comin'..."

Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was Albus Dumbledore, his silver beard gleaming in the dying sun. Next to him trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

"Yeh gotta go," said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. "They musn' find yeh here...Go now..."

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the cloak.

"I'll let yeh out the back way," said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Jade felt strangely unreal, and even more so when she saw Buckbeak a few yards away, tethered to a tree behind Hagrid's pumpkin patch. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground nervously.

"It's okay, Beaky," said Hagrid softly. "It's okay..." He turned to Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione. "Go on," he said. "Get goin'."

But they didn't move.

"Hagrid, we can't--"

"It's not right--"

"We'll tell them what really happened--"

"They can't kill him--"

"Go!" said Hagrid fiercely. "It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the cloak over Harry, Ron, and Jade, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Hagrid looked at the place where they had just vanished from sight.

"Go quick," he said hoarsely. "Don' listen..."

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid's house. As they reached the other side, the front door closed with a snap.

"Please, let's hurry," Hermione whispered. "I can't stand it, I can't bear it..."

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple-tinged grey, but to the west there was a ruby-red glow.

Ron stopped dead.

“Oh, please, Ron,” Hermione began.

“It’s Scabbers—he won’t—stay put--”

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk, squeaking madly, twisting and flailing, trying to sink his teeth into Ron’s hand.

“Scabbers, it’s me, you idiot, it’s Ron,” Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men’s voices.

“Oh, Ron, please let’s move, they’re going to do it,” Jade breathed.

“Okay—Scabbers, stay *put*--”

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione and Jade, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped again.

“I can’t hold him—Scabbers, shut up, everyone’ll hear us--”

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid’s garden. There was a jumble of indistinct male voices, a silence, and then, without warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

“They did it!” she whispered to Jade and Harry. “I d—don’t believe it—they did it!”

Chapter 11

Jade's mind had gone blank with shock. The four of them stood transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shadowed grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Jade heard Harry mutter. He made to turn back, but Ron, Hermione, and Jade stopped him.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him..."

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How—could—they?" she choked. "How *could* they?"

"Come on," said Jade, whose teeth were chattering.

They set off back to the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the cloak. The light was fading fast now. By the time they reached open ground, darkness was settling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden halt, trying to force Scabbers deeper into his pocket. "What's the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still—OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute--"

"He won't—stay—put--"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the *matter* with him?"

But Jade had just seen—slinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness—Crookshanks. Whether he could see them or was following the sound Scabbers’s squeaks, Harry couldn’t tell.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione moaned. “No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!”

But the cat was getting nearer—

“Scabbers—NO!”

Too late—the rat had slipped between Ron’s clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, Crookshanks sprang after him, and before Harry, Jade, or Hermione could stop him, Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

“*Ron!*” Hermione moaned.

She, Jade, and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it was impossible to run full out under the cloak; they pulled it off and it streamed behind them like a banner as they hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

“Get away from him—get away—Scabbers, come *here--*”

There was a loud thud.

“*Gotcha!* Get off, you stinking cat--”

Harry, Jade, and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, but Scabbers was back in his pocket; he had both hands held tight over the quivering lump.

“Ron—come on—back under the cloak--” Hermione panted. “Dumbledore—the Minister—they’ll be coming back out in a minute--”

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of gigantic

paws...Something was bounding toward them, quiet as a shadow—an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

The dog made an enormous leap and the front paws hit Harry on the chest; he kneeled over backward in a whirl of hair.

But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off Harry. He tried to stand back up.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog's jaws fastened instead on around Ron's outstretched arm. Harry lunged forward, he seized a handful of the brute's hair, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll—

Then, out of nowhere, something hit Jade so hard across the chest she was knocked off her feet. She heard Hermione shriek with pain and fall.

Jade grabbed her wand and muttered, "*Lumos!*"

The wandlight showed her the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots—Ron was fighting furiously, but his head and torso were slipping out of sight—

"Ron!" Jade heard Harry shout, and he tried to follow, but a heavy branch whopped lethally through the air and he was forced backward again.

All they could see now was one of Ron's legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him farther underground—but a horrible crack cut the air like a gunshot; Ron's leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

"Harry, Jade—we've got to go for help--" Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

“No! That thing’s big enough to eat him; we haven’t got time--”

“Harry—we’re never going to get through without help--”

“If that dog can get in, we can,” Jade panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches, but she couldn’t get an inch nearer to the tree roots without being in range of the tree’s blows.

“Oh, help, help,” Hermione whispered frantically, dancing uncertainly on the spot, “please...”

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws upon a knot on the trunk.

Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry’s arm painfully hard. “How did he know--?”

“He’s friends with that dog,” said Harry grimly. “I’ve seen them together. Come on—and keep your wand out--”

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had slid into it with a flick of his bottlebrush tail. Harry went next, then Jade; she crawled forward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a low tunnel. Crookshanks was a little way along, his eyes flashing in the light from Harry’s and Jade’s wands. Seconds later, Hermione slithered down beside them.

“Where’s Ron?” she whispered in a terrified voice.

“This way,” said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crookshanks.

“Where does this tunnel come out?” Jade asked breathlessly from behind him.

"I don't know...It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever gotten into it...It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade..."

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. On and on went the passage...All Jade could do was think of Ron and what the enormous dog might be doing to him...She was drawing breath in sharp, painful gasps, running at a crouch...

And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks was gone. Instead, Jade could see a patch of dim light as through a small opening.

She, Harry, and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. All of them raised their wands to see what lay before them.

It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; every piece of furniture was broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all boarded up.

Jade glanced at Harry, who was looking at Hermione, and Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded.

Jade pulled herself up out of the hole after Harry. She stared around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows.

"Harry, Jade," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Jade looked around. Her eyes fell upon a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; on the legs had been ripped off entirely.

"Ghosts don't do that," she said slowly.

At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had moved upstairs. They looked up at the ceiling. Hermione's grip on Harry's

arm was so tight he was losing feeling in his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded and let go.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and up the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the floor, where a wide shiny stripe had been made by something being dragged upstairs.

They reached the dark landing.

“Now!” they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they crept toward it, they heard movement from behind it; a low moan, and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod.

Wand held tight before him, Harry kicked the door wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor beside him, clutching his leg, which stuck out at a strange angle, was Ron.

Harry, Hermione, and Jade dashed across to him.

“Ron—are you okay?”

“Where’s the dog?”

“Not a dog,” Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. “Harry, it’s a trap--”

“What--”

“He’s the dog...he’s an Animagus...”

Ron was staring over Jade and Harry’s shoulders. The twins wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn’t been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it

looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black.

"Expelliarmus!" he croaked, pointing Ron's wand at them.

Harry's, Hermione's, and Jade's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said hoarsely. His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of using it. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, both of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful...it will make everything much easier..."

Harry started forward, but three pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back... "No Harry! Don't you remember what I said?" Jade snarled in a whisper. Ron, however, spoke to Black.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes.

"Lie down," he said quietly to Ron. "You will damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all four of us!"

"There'll be only one murder tonight," said Black, and his grin widened.

"Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench free of Ron, Hermione and Jade. "Didn't you care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew...What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

"Harry!" Hermione whimpered. "Be quiet!"

“HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!” Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione’s, Ron’s and Jade’s restraint and lunged forward—

Black didn’t even raise the wands in time—one of Harry’s hands fastened over his wasted wrist, forcing the wind tips away; the knuckles of Harry’s other hand collided with the side of Black’s head and they fell backward, into the wall—

Hermione was screaming, Ron was yelling, Jade could only watch in shock; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black’s hand sent a jet of sparks into the air that missed Harry’s face by inches.

But Black’s hand had found Harry’s throat—

“No,” he hissed, “I’ve waited too long--”

The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew.

Jade bolted over to Black and kicked him hard in face. Hermione swung her foot into his ribs while Ron threw himself on Black’s wand hand and Harry heard a faint clatter—

As Harry moved out of the way, Jade bent down and kept punching Black in the face, using all of her anger and frustration as energy.

“Get out of the way!” Harry suddenly shouted at Ron, Hermione, and Jade.

Jade would have loved to keep punching, but Hermione grabbed her arm and pulled her away. They both snatched up their wands, including Ron’s. Hermione, gasping for breath scrambled aside with Jade’s arm in her grasp. Ron crawled to the four-poster and collapsed onto it, panting, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His sallow face was covered in blood, and he wiped it out of his eyes with his sleeve. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly nearer, his wand pointing straight at Black’s heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking at him. "You killed my parents," said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

"I don't deny it," he said very quietly. "But if you knew the whole story.

"What fucking story?" snapped Jade, glaring at the man. "You sold our parents to Voldemort. What else is there?"

"You've got to listen to me, both of you," Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't...You don't understand..."

"We understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? My mum...trying to stop Voldemort from hurting me...and you did that...you did it..."

Before any of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black's chest and settled himself there, right over Black's heart. Black blinked and looked down at the cat.

"Get off," he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off of him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black's robes and wouldn't shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and looked up at him with those great yellow eyes. Hermione let a dry sob, and Jade patted her back.

Harry raised the wand.

The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his chest. Ron's ragged breathing came from near the bed; Hermione and Jade were quite silent.

And then came a new sound—

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor—someone was moving downstairs.

“WE’RE UP HERE!” Hermione screamed suddenly. “WE’RE UP HERE—SIRIUS BLACK—*QUICK!*”

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crookshanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively, but the footsteps were thundering up the stairs and Harry still hadn’t done it.

The door of the room burst open and in a shower of red sparks and Jade wheeled around as Professor Lupin and a woman with long brown hair came hurtling into the room, their faces bloodless, their wands raised and ready. Their eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, over Jade, watching the woman with a shocked expression, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Black, and the to Black himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry’s feet.

“*Expelliarmus!*” the woman shouted.

Harry’s wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the ones Hermione and Jade were holding. The woman caught them all deftly.

Lupin and the woman moved into the room, staring at Black, who still had Crookshanks lying protectively across his chest.

Then Lupin spoke, in a very tense voice.

“Where is he, Sirius?”

Jade and Harry looked quickly at Lupin. She didn’t understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? Jade turned to look at Black again.

Black’s face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn’t move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand and pointed straight at Ron. Mystified, Jade glanced at Ron, who looked bewildered.

“But then...,” Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, “...why hasn’t he shown himself before now? Unless”—Lupin and the woman’s eyes widened, as though they were seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see, “—unless *he* was the one...unless you switched...without telling me?”

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin’s face, Black nodded.

“Professor,” Harry interrupted loudly, “what’s going on—?”

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin and the woman were lowering their wands, gazing fixedly at Black. The Professor walked to Black’s side, seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Jade felt as though the bottom of her stomach had drop all the way to the ground as the woman hugged Black close to her.

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!” Hermione and Jade screamed.

The woman let go and her and Lupin turned to the two girls. They had raised themselves off the floor and were pointing at Lupin and the woman. “Heather, what the fuck is this?” Jade demanded as Hermione stuttered, “You—you--”

“Hermione--”

“Jade--”

“—you and him!” both girls stuttered.

“Hermione, calm down--”

“Jade, please--”

“I didn’t tell anyone!” Hermione shrieked. “I’ve been covering up for you--”

“What the hell?” Jade roared. “You’ve been helping *him* all this time?! You traitor!”

“Jade, listen to me--,” Heather tried to beg, but Jade cut her off.

“No! Why should I? You’ve been on the Dark Side all of this time, haven’t you? Waiting for this asshole to escape, huh?”

“Hermione, Jade, listen to us, please!” Lupin shouted. “We can explain--”

“I trusted you!” Harry shouted at Lupin, ignoring the woman, his voice wavering out of control, “and all the time you’ve been his friend!”

“You’re wrong,” said Lupin. “I haven’t been Sirius’s friend, neither of us have, but we are now—Let me explain...”

“NO!” Hermione screamed. “Harry, don’t trust him, he’s been helping--”

“--Black get into the castle, both of them have, they want you dead too--”

“—*he’s a werewolf!*”

There was a ringing silence. Everyone’s eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale.

“Not at all up at your usual standards, girls,” he said. “Only one out of three, I’m afraid. Neither Heather and I have been helping Sirius get into the castle nor want Harry dead...” An odd shiver passed over his face. “But I won’t deny that I am a werewolf.”

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped,

“*Get away from me, werewolf!*”

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, “How long have you known?” “Ages,” Hermione whispered. “Since I did Professor Snape’s essay...”

"He'll be delighted," said Lupin coolly. "He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms were...Did you check the lunar chart and realize that I was ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me when I was helping Jade?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," Hermione whispered. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are!"

"But they already know," said Lupin. "At least, the staff do."

"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?" Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy--"

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry yelled. "YOU'VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!" He was pointing at Black, who suddenly crossed to the four-poster bed and sank into it, his face hidden in one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both of them, dragging his leg.

"Remus hasn't been helping him, and neither have--" Heather tried to say.

"WHY THE FUCK SHOULD WE BELIEVE YOU?" Jade shouted, feeling all of her anger boil inside of her. "ALL YOU'VE EVER TOLD ME WERE LIES! YOU SAID NOTHING ABOUT HARRY, OR MY PARENTS!"

"Jade, Dumbledore wanted to keep your identity a secret," Heather said calmly. "I was only doing what he wanted me to."

“SO WHAT! HE WAS THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY! DON’T YOU REMEMBER TELLING ME ALL OF THOSE MORALS! YOU ARE YOUR OWN PERSON! YOU CAN MAKE ALL OF YOUR DECISIONS! WHAT A LOAD OF BULL SHIT!”

“JADE POTTER, DON’T YOU DARE TALK TO ME LIKE THAT!” Heather yelled suddenly.

“YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER ME! YOU’RE NOT MY MOTHER! YOU’VE BEEN HELPING THIS CONVICT EVER SINCE I WENT TO HOGWARTS! JUST LIKE LUPIN!”

“We have *not* been helping Sirius!” said Lupin, trying to calm Jade and Heather down. “If you’ll give us a chance, we’ll explain. Look--”

Heather separated Harry’s, Ron’s, Jade’s, and Hermione’s wands and threw each back to their owner; Jade caught hers, calming down.

“There,” said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt while Heather shoved hers into her pocket. “You’re armed, we’re not. Now will you listen?”

“If you haven’t been with him,” Harry said, with a furious glance at Black, “how did you know he was here?”

“The map,” said Lupin. “The Marauder’s Map. I was in my office examining it--”

“You know how to work it?” Harry said suspiciously.

“Of course I know how to work it,” said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. “I helped write it. I’m Moony—that was what my friends’ nickname for me at school.”

“You *wrote*--?”

“The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, Jade, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

"You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Harry--"

"How d'you know about the cloak?"

"The number of times I saw James disappearing under it...", said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. "The point is, even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else."

"What?" said Harry. "No, we weren't!"

"I couldn't believe my eyes," said Lupin, still pacing, and ignoring Harry's interruption. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?"

"No one was with us!" said Harry.

"And then I was another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled *Sirius Black*...I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow--"

"One of us!" Ron said angrily.

"No, Ron," said Lupin. "Two of you."

He had stopped facing, his eyes moving over Ron.

"Do you think I could have a look at the rat?" he said evenly.

"What?" said Ron. "What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Lupin. "Could I see him, please?"

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long bald tail to stop him from escaping. Crookshanks stood up on Black's leg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin and Heather moved closer to Ron. They seemed to be holding their breath as they gazed intently at Scabbers.

“What?” said Ron again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. “What’s my rat got to do with anything?”

“That’s not a rat,” croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

“What d’you mean—of course he’s a rat--”

“No, he’s not,” said Heather.

“He’s a wizard,” said Lupin quietly.

“An Animagus,” said Black, “by the name of Peter Pettigrew.”

Chapter 12

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Jade was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's *dead!*" said Harry. "*He* killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched convulsively.

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me...not this time, though!"

And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on his broken leg.

"Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled as he and Heather launched themselves forward and dragged Black away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that—they need to understand—we've got to explain--"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin and Heather off. One was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Scabbers, who was squealing like a piglet, scratching Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've—got—a—right—to—know—everything!" Heather panted, still trying to restrain Black.

"Ron's kept him as a pet!" said Lupin. "There are parts of it even Heather and I don't understand! And Harry and Jade—you owe them the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's bitten, scratched, and bleeding hands.

“All right, then,” Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat. “Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for...”

“You’re nutters, all three of you,” said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry, Hermione, and Jade for support. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m off.”

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

“You’re going to hear me out, Ron,” he said quietly. “Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen.”

“HE’S NOT PETER, HE’S SCABBERS!” Ron yelled, trying to force the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting too hard; Ron swayed and overbalanced, and Harry caught him and pushed him back down on to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

“There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die,” he said. “A whole street full of them...”

“They didn’t see what they thought they saw!” said Black savagely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron’s hands.

“Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter,” said Lupin, nodding. “I believed it myself—until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder’s Map never lies...Peter’s alive. Ron’s holding him, Harry.”

Jade watched Harry look down at Ron.

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sensibly.

“But Professor Lupin...Scabbers can’t be Pettigrew...it’s just can’t be true, you know it can’t...”

“Why can’t it be true?” Heather said calmly.

“Because...because people would *know* if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework—the Ministry of Magic keeps tables on witches and wizards who can become animals; there’s a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things...and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew’s name wasn’t on the list--”

Jade had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to laugh.

“Right again, Hermione!” he said. “But the Ministry never knew that there used to be four unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts.”

“If you’re going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus,” snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers’s every desperate move. “I’ve waited twelve years, I’m not going to wait much longer.”

“All right...but you’ll need to help me,” said Lupin, “I only know how it began...”

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. “The bedroom door had opened on its own accord. All seven of them stared at it. Then Lupin strode toward it and looked out into the landing.

“No one there...”

“This place is haunted!” said Ron.

“It’s not,” said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. “The Shrieking Shack was never haunted...The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me.”

He pushed the graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a moment, then said, “That’s where all of this—with my becoming a werewolf. None of this could have happened if I hadn’t been bitten...and if I hadn’t been so foolhardy...”

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Hermione said, “Shh!” She and Jade were watching Lupin very intently.

“I was a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making me for me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform...I am able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again.

“Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I became a fully fledged monster once a month. It seemed impossible that I would be able to come to Hogwarts. Other parents weren’t likely to want their children exposed to me.

But then Dumbledore became Headmaster, and he was sympathetic. He said that as long as we took certain precautions, there was no reason I shouldn’t come to school...” Lupin sighed, and looked directly at Harry. “I told you, months ago, that the Whomping Willow was planted the year I came to Hogwarts. The truth is that it was planted *because* I came to Hogwarts. This house”—Lupin looked miserably around the room—“the tunnel that leads to it—they were built for my use. Once a month, I was smuggled out the castle, into this place, to transform. The tree was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous.”

Jade listened raptly to Lupin’s story, wondering where it was going. The only sound apart from Lupin’s voice was Scabbers’s frightened squeaking.

“My transformations in those days were—were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead. The villagers heard the noise and the screaming and thought they were hearing particularly violent spirits. Dumbledore encouraged the rumor...Even now, when the house has been silent for years, the villagers don’t dare approach it...”

“But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, four great friends.

Sirius Black...Peter Pettigrew...Heather Williams...and, of course your father, Harry and Jade,--James Potter.”

“Now, my four friends could hardly fail to notice that I disappeared once a month, I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her...I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they, like you, Hermione, worked out the truth...”

“And they didn’t desert me. Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi.”

“Our dad too?” said Harry, astounded.

“Yes, indeed,” said Lupin. “It took them the best part of three years to work out how to do it. Your father, Sirius, and Heather here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong—one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James, Sirius, and Heather. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will.”

“But how did that help you?” said Hermione, looking puzzled.

“They couldn’t keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals,” said Lupin. “A werewolf is only a danger to people. They sneaked out of the castle every month under James’s Invisibility Cloak. They transformed...Peter, being the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow’s attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind seemed to become less so while I was with them.”

“Hurry, up, Remus,” snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

“I’m getting there, Sirius, I’m getting there...well, highly exciting possibilities were open to us now that we could all transform. Soon we were leaving the Shrieking Shack and roaming the school

grounds and the village by night. Sirius, James, and Heather transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check. I doubt whether any Hogwarts students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did...And that's now we came to write the Marauder's Map, and sign it with our nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Heather is Midnight. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs."

"What sort of animal--?" Harry began, but Hermione cut him off.

"That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you'd given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?"

"A thought that still haunts me," said Lupin heavily. "And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless—carried away with our own cleverness."

"I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore's trust, of course...he had admitted me to Hogwarts when no other headmaster would have done so, and he had no idea I was breaking the rules he had set down for my own and others' safety. He never knew I had led four fellow students into becoming Animagi illegally. But I always managed to forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And I haven't changed..."

Lupin's face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice, "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admitting that I'd led others along with me...and Dumbledore's trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had nothing to do with it...so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

“Snape?” said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin and Heather. “What’s Snape got to do with it?”

“He’s here, Sirius,” said Heather quietly. “He’s teaching here as well.”

Lupin looked up at Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione. “Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore all year that I am not to be trusted. He had his reasons...you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me--”

Black made a derisive noise.

“It served him right,” he sneered. “Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to...hoping he could get us expelled...”

“Severus was very interested in where I went every month,” Lupin told Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade. “We were in the same year, you know, and we—er—didn’t like each other very much. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James’s talent on the Quidditch field...anyway Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be—er—amusing, to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he’d be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it—if he’d got as far as this house, he’s have met a fully grown werewolf—but your father, who’d heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life...Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was...”

“So that’s why Snape doesn’t like you,” said Harry slowly, “because he thought you were in on the joke?”

“That’s right,” sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin.

Chapter 13

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Jade stared at the greasy man in shock.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep his wand pointing directly at Lupin's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you..."

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said, his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did...lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you and the Williams running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus--" Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. And I guess Williams was in on it the whole time. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout--"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Lupin urgently. "You haven't heard everything—I can explain—Sirius is not here to kill Harry--"

"Three more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this...He was quite convinced that you were harmless...a *tame* werewolf--"

"You fool," said Heather softly. "Last time I checked, you should never let any feelings cloud your mind."

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Heather's and Lupin's mouths, wrists, and ankles; they both overbalanced and fell to the floor, unable to move. With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black's eyes.

“Give me a reason,” he whispered. “Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will.”

“You son of a bitch!” Jade snarled, glaring coldly at Snape. “How dare you!”

“Potter, you are already facing suspension from this school,” Snape spat. “You, Potter, Granger, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer, a werewolf, and their accomplice. For once in your life, *hold your tongue*.”

“Yeah, I’m really going to listen to a maniac!”

“KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!” Snape shouted, looking suddenly deranged. “DON’T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND!” A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Black’s face. Jade glared coldly, but fell silent.

“Vengeance is very sweet,” Snape breathed at Black. “How I hoped I would be the one to catch you...”

“The joke’s on you, Severus,” Black snarled. “As long as the boy brings his rat up to the castle”—he jerked his head at Ron—“I’ll come quietly...”

“Up to the castle?” said Snape silkily. “I don’t think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get out of the Willow. They’ll be very pleased to see you, Black...pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay...”

What little color there was in Black’s left it.

“You—you’ve got to hear me out,” he croaked. “The rat—look at the rat--”

But there was a mad glint in Snape’s eyes that Jade had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

“Come on, all of you,” he said. He clicked his fingers, and the end of the cords that bound Lupin and Heather flew to his hands. “I’ll drag

the werewolf and the wench. Perhaps the dementors will have a kiss for them too--"

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

"Get out of the way, Potter, you're in enough trouble already," snarled Snape. "If I hadn't been here to save your skin--"

"Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year," Harry said. "I've been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn't he just finish me off then?"

"Don't ask me to fathom the way a werewolf's mind works," hissed Snape. "Get out of the way, Potter."

"YOU'RE PATHETIC!" Harry yelled. "JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN--"

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. "Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have did like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black—now get out of the way, or I will *make you*. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Before Snape could take even one more step toward him, Jade had raised her wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" she yelled, only it wasn't just her voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Jade looked around. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Black, looking at Harry and Jade. “You should have left him to me...”

Jade avoided Black’s eyes. She wasn’t sure, even now, that she’d done the right thing.

“We attacked a teacher...We attacked a teacher...,” Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. “Oh, we’re going to be in so much trouble--”

Lupin and Heather were struggling against their bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied them both. Lupin and Heather stood up, Lupin rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

“Thank you, Harry,” he said.

“I’m still not saying I believe you,” he told Lupin.

“Then it’s time we offered you some proof,” said Heather. “You, boy—give me Peter, please. Now.”

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

“Come off it,” he said weakly. “Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on *Scabbers*? I mean...” He looked up at Harry, Jade, and Hermione for support, “Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat—there are millions of rats—how’s he supposed to know which one he’s after if he was locked up in Azkaban?”

“You know, Sirius, that’s a fair question,” said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly. “How *did* you find out where he was?”

Black put one of his clawlike hands into his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to the others.

It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* the previous summer, and there, on Ron’s shoulder, was Scabbers.

“How did you get this?” Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

“Fudge,” said Black. “When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page...on this boy’s shoulder...I knew at once...how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts...to where Harry was...”

“My God,” said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. “His front paw...”

“What about it?” said Ron defiantly.

“He’s got a toe missing,” said Black.

“Of course,” Heather breathed. “So simple...so *brilliant*...he cut it off himself?”

“Just before he transformed,” said Black. “When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I’d betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself—and sped down into the sewer with the other rats...”
“Didn’t you ever wonder, Ron?” said Lupin. “The biggest bit of Peter they was his finger.”

“Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He’s been in my family for ages, right--”

“Twelve years, in fact,” said Heather. “Didn’t you ever wonder why he was living so long?”

“We—we’ve been taking good care of him!” said Ron.

“Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?” said Lupin. “I’d guess he’s been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again...”

“He’s been scared of that mad cat!” said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

“This cat isn’t mad,” said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks’s fluffy head. “He’s the most intelligent of

his kind I've ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me...Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he's been helping me..."

"What do you mean?" breathed Jade and Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't...so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me...As I understand it, he took them from a boy's bedside table..."

Jade's brain seemed to buzz with all of this new information. It was crazy...and yet...

"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it..." croaked Black. "This cat—Crookshanks, did you call him?—told me Peter had left blood on the sheets...I supposed he bit himself...Well, faking his own death had worked once..."

These words seemed to jolt Harry to his senses.

"And why did he fake his death?" he said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No," said Lupin, "Harry--"

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

"Then we should've let Snape take you!" Jade shouted angrily.

"Harry, Jade," said Lupin hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down—but it was the other way around, don't you see? *Peter* betrayed your mother and father—Sirius tracked *Peter* down--"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP! HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

He was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly overbright.

“Harry...I as good as killed them,” he croaked. “I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me...I’m to blame, I know it...The night they died, I’d arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he’d gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn’t feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents’ house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies...I realized what Peter must’ve done...what I ‘d done...”

His voice broke. He turned away, and Heather put her hand on his shoulder.

“Enough of this,” said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Jade had never heard before. “There’s one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, *give me that rat.*”

“What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?” Ron asked Lupin tensely.

“Force him to show himself,” said Lupin. “If he really is a rat, it won’t hurt him.”

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head.

“Ready, Sirius?” said Lupin. Black had retrieved Snape’s wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

“Together?” he said quietly to Heather and Lupin.

“I think so,” said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. “On the count of three. One—two—THREE!”

A flash of blue-white erupted from all three wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen midair, his small gray form twisting madly—Ron

yelled—the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then—

It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up.

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Jade. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose and his very small nose and his very small, watery eyes. He looked around at them at all, his breathing fast and shallow. Jade saw his eyes dart to the door and back again.

"Well, hello, Peter," said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see."

"S—Sirius...H-Heather...R-Remus..." Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted to the door. "My friends...my old friends..."

Black's wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning look, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed--"

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, and Jade could see beads of sweat breaking out over his pasty face, "you don't believe him, do you...? He tried to kill me, Remus..."

"So we've heard," said Heather, more coldly than Lupin. "Now, if you'd be so kind, we'd like to clear thi--"

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Black, and Jade saw that he used his middle finger, because his index was missing. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to kill me too...You've got to help me, Remus and Heather..."

Black's face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," said Lupin.

"Sorted things out?" squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again, the only door. "I knew he'd come after me! I knew he'd be back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" said Lupin, his brow furrowed. "When nobody has ever done it before?"

"He's got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Pettigrew shouted shrilly. "How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!"

Black started to laugh, a horrible mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

"Voldemort, teach me tricks?" he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

"What, scared to hear your old master's name?" said Black. "I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with you, are they?"

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius--" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

"You haven't been hiding from *me* for twelve years," said Black. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter...They all think you're dead, or you'd have to

answer to them...I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters' on your information...and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways...If they ever got wind that you were alive, Peter--"

"Don't know...what you're talking about..." said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Heather. "You don't believe this—this madness, Heather--"

"I'd take Sirius's word over yours any day," said Heather venomously. "Tell me, why would an innocent man want to spend twelve years at a rat?"

"Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best man in Azkaban—the spy, Sirius Black!"

Black's face contorted.

"How dare you," he growled, sounding suddenly like the bear-sized dog he had been. "I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter—I'll never understand why I didn't see you were a spy from the start. You always like big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us...me and Remus...Heather and James..."

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

"Me, a spy...must be out of your mind...never...don't know how you can say such a--"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it," Black hissed, so dangerously that Pettigrew took a step backward. "I thought it was the perfect plan...a bluff...Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you...It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Jade caught words like “far-fetched” and “lunacy,” but she couldn’t help but paying more attention to the ashen color of Pettigrew’s face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

“Professor Lupin?” said Hermione timidly. “Can—can I say something?”

“Certainly, Hermione,” said Lupin courteously.

“Well—Scabbers—I mean, this—this man—he’s been sleeping in Harry’s dormitory for three years. If he’s working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?”

“There!” said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. “Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry’s head! Why should I?”

“I’ll tell you why,” said Black. “Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort’s been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he’s half dead. You weren’t about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore’s nose, for a wreck of a wizard who’d lost all of his power, were you? You’d want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn’t you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren’t you, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him...”

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

“Er—Mr. Black—Sirius?” said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how—how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn’t use Dark Magic?”

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I--"

But Lupin and Heather silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he was annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind was that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't suck it out of me...but it kept me sane and knowing who I am...helped me keep my powers...so when it all became...too much...I could transform in my cell...become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know..." He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions...They could tell that my feelings were less-less human, less complex when I was a dog...but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope driving them away without a wand..."

"But then I saw Peter in that picture...I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry...perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again..."

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"...ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies...and to deliver the last Potters to them. If he gave them Harry and found Jade, who'd dare say he'd betray Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors..."

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was alive..."

"It was as if someone had lit a fire in my head, and the dementors couldn't destroy it...It wasn't a happy feeling...it was an obsession...but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog...It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused...I was thin, very thin...thin enough to slip through the

bars...I swam as a dog back to mainland...I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry..."

He looked at Harry and Jade, who both did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry, Jade. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

At long last, Jade believed him. Throats too tight to speak, Harry and Jade nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's and Jade's nods had been his own death sentences. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

"Sirius—it's me...it's Peter...your friend...you wouldn't..."

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Heather!" gasped Pettigrew. "Don't believe this—this nonsense...you remember Sirius's fami--"

"Why should I listen to a groveling traitor?" snarled Heather, glaring coldly.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this...wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd switched the plan?"

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Lupin. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over Pettigrew's head.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Black.

“Not at all, Padfoot, old friend,” said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. “And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing *you* were the spy?”

“Of course,” said Black, and the ghost of a grim flitted across his gaunt face. He and Heather, too, began rolling up their sleeves. “Shall we kill him all together, Midnight?”

“Ah, I think so,” said Heather, grinning.

“You wouldn’t...you won’t...,” gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

“Ron...haven’t I been a good friend...a good pet? You won’t let them kill me, Ron, will you...you’re on my side, aren’t you?”

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

“I let you sleep on my *bed!*” he said.

“Kind boy...kind master...” Pettigrew crawled toward Ron, “you won’t let them do it...I was your rat...I was a good pet...”

“If you made a better rat than human, it’s not much to boast about, Peter,” said Black harshly. Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Pettigrew’s reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione’s robes.

“Sweet girl...clever girl...you—you won’t let them...Help me...”

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew’s clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry and Jade.

“Harry...Jade...you both look just like your father...just like him...”

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY AND JADE?” roared Black. “HOW DARE YOU FACE THEM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES AND LILY IN FRONT OF HIM?”

“Harry,” whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him and Jade, hands outstretched. “Jade, Harry, James wouldn’t have wanted me killed...James would have understood...he would have shown me mercy...”

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew’s shoulders, and threw him backward on the floor. He sat there, twitching with terror, staring up at them.

“You sold Lily and James to Voldemort,” said Black, who was shaking too. “Do you deny it?”

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

‘Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord...you have no idea...he has weapons you can’t imagine...I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and James and Remus and Heather. I never meant it to happen...He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me--’

“DON’T LIE!” bellowed Black. “YOU’D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!”

“He—he was taking over everywhere!” gasped Pettigrew. “Wh—what was there to be gained by refusing him?”

“What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?” said Black, with a terribly fury in his face. “Only innocent lives, Peter!”

“You don’t understand!” whined Pettigrew. “He would have killed me, Sirius!”

“THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!” roared Black. “DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!”

Black, Lupin, and Heather stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

"You should have realized," said Lupin quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter."

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

"NO!" Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front of Pettigrew, facing the wands. "You can't kill him," he said breathlessly. "You can't."

"Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you and Jade have no parents," Black snarled. "This cringing piece of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family."

"Harry!" gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry's knees. "You—thank you—it's more than I deserve thank you--"

"Get off me," Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew's hands off him in disgust. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because—I don't reckon my dad would've wanted them to become killers—just for you."

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black, Lupin, and Heather were looking at each other. Then, in one movement, they lowered their wands.

"You and Jade are the only ones who have the right to decide, Harry," said Black. "But think...think what he did..."

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does..."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Lupin. "Stand aside, Harry."

Harry hesitated.

"I'm going to tie him up," said Lupin. "That's all, I swear."

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we *will* kill you. You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Heather, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I believe, I don't have the right potion to help your leg, but I can strap your leg until we get you to the hospital wing. Then, Madam Pomfrey can mend it."

She hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with her wand, and muttered, "*Ferlula*." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Heather helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Heather, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You just were a bit—over passionate. Still out cold. Er—perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safely back in the castle. We can take him like this..."

She muttered, "*Mobilicorpus*." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Lupin.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy muscles from thin air; soon, Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin's right, right arm to Ron's left. Ron's face was set. He seemed to have taken Scabbers's true identity as a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jauntily high.

Chapter 14

Jade had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius, who had Heather by his side. Harry, Hermione, and Jade brought up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had Pettigrew covered with his wand. Jade could see them edging awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Jade went after Black, who was still making Snape drift along ahead of them; he kept bumping his lolling head on the low ceiling. Jade had the impression Sirius was making no effort to prevent this.

"You know what this means?" Sirius said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. "Turning Pettigrew in?"

"You're free," said Harry.

"Yes...", said Sirius. "But I'm also—I don't know if anyone ever told—I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Harry.

"Well...your parents appointed me your guardian," said Sirius stiffly. "If anything happened to them..."

"I'll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle," said Sirius. "But well...if you wanted...think about it. Once my name's cleared...if you wanted...a different home..."

"What—live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Sirius quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd--"

“Are you insane?” said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Sirius’s. “Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?”

Sirius turned right around to look at him; Snape’s head was scraping the ceiling but Sirius didn’t seem to care.

“You want to?” he said. “You mean it?”

“Yeah, I mean it!” said Harry.

Sirius’s gaunt face broke into the first true smile Jade had ever seen upon it. She glanced at Heather, who looked like she was trying not to laugh at Snape. She suddenly wondered if she, Heather, and Keira could live with them.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel. Crookshanks darted up first, he had evidently pressed his paw to the knot on the trunk, because Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Sirius saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry, Jade, Hermione, and Heather to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Pettigrew was still wheezing and occasionally whimpering.

“One wrong move,” said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew’s chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead of Sirius, his chin bumping on his chest. And then—

A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Sirius froze. He flung out one arm to make Harry, Jade, Hermione, and Heather stop.

Jade could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my--" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Sirius whispered. "Run. Now."

But Jade couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. Harry leapt forward but Black caught him around the chest and threw him back.

"Leave it to me—RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away—

As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disappeared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous, bear-like dog bounded forward. As the werewolf wrenched itself free of the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew. They were locked, jaw to jaw, claws ripping at each other—

Jade rushed over to Ron as he fell on his back. Hermione screamed and there was a bang, and then, nothing.

Jade let out a low moan, and opened her eyes. A familiar, vivid white ceiling glared down at her. She looked around her and saw Harry and Hermione lying on their beds and Ron leaning on another.

"Uh—what happened?" groaned Jade. "Where's Heather? And Lupin and Sirius? Did anyone get Pettigrew?"

"You explain," said Harry to Hermione, helping himself to a piece of chocolate.

When Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. The sweltering

heat and the end of the exams meant that everyone was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron, Jade, nor Hermione felt like going, so they and Harry wandered onto the grounds, still talking about the extraordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Heather had gone back to America after saying good-bye to Jade and Keira.

Sitting near the lake, watching the giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the water, Jade had finally found her peace...

A shadow fell across them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his table-cloth-sized handkerchiefs and beaming down at them.

"Know I shouldn' feel happy, after wha' happened las' night," he said. "I mean, Black escapin' again, an' everythin'—but guess what?"

"What?" they said, pretending to look curious.

"Beaky! He escaped! Bin celebratin' all night!"

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

"Yeah...can't've tied him up properly," said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. "I was worried this mornin', mind...thought he mighta met Professor Lupin on the grounds, but Lupin says he never ate anythin' las' night..."

"What?" said Harry quickly.

"Blimey, haven' yeh heard?" said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody in sight. "Er—Snape told all the Slytherins this mornin'...Thought everyone's know by now...Professor Lupin's a werewolf, see. An' he was loose on the grounds las' night...He's packin' now, o course."

"He's *packing*?" said Harry and Jade, alarmed. "Why?"

“Leavin’, isn’ he?” said Hagrid, looking surprised that they had to ask. “Resigned firs’ thing this mornin’. Says he can’t risk it happenin’ again.”

Harry scrambled to his feet.

“I’m going to see him,” he said to Ron, Jade, and Hermione.

Jade stood as well.

“I’m going too.”

“But if he’s resigned--”

“—doesn’t sound like there’s anything we can do--”

“I don’t care. I still want to see him. We’ll meet you back here.”

Lupin’s office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The grindylow’s empty stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

“I saw you two coming,” said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder’s Map.

“We just saw Hagrid,” said Harry.

“And he said you’d resigned. It’s not true, is it?” Jade finished.

“I’m afraid it is,” said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

“*Why?*” said Harry. “The Ministry of Magic don’t think you were helping Sirius, do they?”

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry and Jade.

“No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives.” He sighed. “That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he—er—*accidentally* let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast.

“Who cares what he says!” Jade exclaimed angrily. “Nobody likes Snape anyways! Well, except for the Slytherins, but that’s only because they’re losers.”

Lupin smiled wryly.

“This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents...They will not want a werewolf teaching their children. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you...That must never happen again.”

“You’re the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we’ve ever had!” said Harry. “Don’t go!”

Lupin shook his head and didn’t speak. He carried on emptying the drawers. Then, while Jade was trying to think of a good argument to make him stay, Lupin said, “From what the headmaster told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I’m proud of anything I’ve done this year, it’s how much you’ve learned...Tell me about your Patronus.”

“How d’you know about that?” said Harry, distracted.

“What else could have driven the dementors back?”

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he’d finished, Lupin was smiling again.

“Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed,” he said. “You guessed right...that’s why we called him Prongs.”

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry and Jade.

“Here—I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night,” he said, handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. “And...” He hesitated, then held out the Marauder’s Map too. “I am no longer your teacher, so I don’t feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It’s no use to me, and I daresay you two, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it.”

Jade took the map for Harry and they both grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, Midnight, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school...you said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son and daughter had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle."

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket while Jade stuffed the Map in hers.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry and Jade there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty grindylow tank.

"Well—good-bye, Harry and Jade," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again sometime. Head master, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage..."

Jade had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Good-bye, then, Remus," said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands. Then, with a final nod to Harry and Jade and a swift smile, Lupin left the office.

Harry sat down in his vacated chair, staring glumly at the floor. Jade leaned against the desk, her arms folded across the chest. They heard the door close and looked up. Dumbledore was still there.

"Why so miserable, Harry?" he said quietly. "You should be very proud of yourself after last night."

"It didn't make a difference," said Harry bitterly. "Pettigrew got away."

"Didn't make any difference?" said Dumbledore quietly. "It made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate."

"Professor Dumbledore—yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very—very strange."

"Indeed?" said Dumbledore. "Er—stranger than usual, you mean?"

"Yes...her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said...she said Voldemort's servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight...She said the servant would help him come back to power." Harry stared up at Dumbledore. "And then she sort of became normal again, and she couldn't remember anything she'd said. Was it—was she making a real prediction?"

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been," he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise..."

"But—but—I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault if Voldemort come back!"

"It does not," said Dumbledore quietly. "Hasn't your experience with the Time-Turner taught you anything, Harry? The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed...Professor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that...You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life."

"But if he helps Voldemort back to power--!"

"Pettigrew owes his life to you, Harry," said Jade suddenly, making both Harry and Dumbledore look at her. "When one wizard saves another's life, it creates a certain bond. Voldemort most likely won't want his servant in the debt of Harry Potter."

"I don't want a connection with Pettigrew!" said Harry. "He betrayed my parents!"

"Trust me, Harry, you might be thankful in the future that you saved Pettigrew's life," said Jade quietly.

"I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and later, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "He would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it."

Harry looked up at him.

"I thought it was my dad who'd conjured my Patronus. I mean, when I saw myself across the lake...I thought I was seeing him."

"An easy mistake," said Dumbledore softly. "I expect you'll tire of hearing it, but you do look *extraordinarily* like James. Both of you do..."

Harry shook his head.

"It was stupid thinking it was him," he muttered. "I mean, I knew he was dead."

"You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think we don't recall them more clearly than ever in time of great trouble? Your father lives inside of you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that *particular* Patronus? Prongs rode again last night."

It took a moment for Harry and Jade to realize what Dumbledore had said.

"Last night Sirius told me all about how they became Animagi," said Dumbledore, smiling. "An extraordinary achievement—not least, keeping it quiet from me. And then I remembered the most unusual form your Patronus took, when it charged Mr. Malfoy down at your Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night...You found him inside yourself."

Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened the night that Sirius, Buckbeak, and Pettigrew had vanished except Harry, Ron, Jade, and Professor Dumbledore. As the end of term approached, Jade heard many different theories about what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.

Malfoy was furious about Buckbeak. He was convinced that Hagrid had found a way of smuggling the hippogriff to safety, and seemed outraged that he and his father had been outwitted by a gamekeeper. Percy Weasley, meanwhile, had much to say on the subject of Sirius's escape.

"If I manage to get into the Ministry, I'll have a lot of proposals to make about Magical Law Enforcement!" he told the only person who would listen—his girlfriend, Penelope.

Jade certainly wasn't the only one who was sorry to see Professor Lupin go. The whole of her Defense Against the Dark Arts class was miserable about his resignation.

"Wonder what they'll get us next year?" said Seamus Finnigan gloomily,

"Maybe a vampire," suggested Dean Thomas hopefully.

Keira and Jade had talked it over, and Keira would go back to America to be home-schooled by Heather, while Jade would stay at Hogwarts. She just couldn't leave her brother behind, not now that she finally found her family.

The exam results came out on the last day of term. Harry, Ron, Jade, and Hermione had passed every subject.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, meanwhile, largely thanks to their spectacular performance in the Quidditch Cup, had won the House championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold, and that the Gryffindor table was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next morning, Hermione gave Harry, Ron, and Jade some surprising news.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent!" said Ron.

"I know," sighed Hermione, "but I can't stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I've handed it in. Without Muggle Studies and Divination, I'll be able to have a normal schedule again."

"I still can't *believe* you didn't tell us about it," said Ron grumpily. "We're supposed to be your *friends*."

"I promised I wouldn't tell *anyone*," said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear from view behind a mountain.

"Oh, cheer up, Harry!" said Hermione sadly.

"I'm okay," said Harry quickly. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them, too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I'll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now--"

"A *telephone*, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, *you* should take Muggle Studies next year..."

Ron ignored her.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work."

Harry cheered up a bit. "Yeah...I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come...especially after what I did to Aunt Marge..."

“Well, if it’s any condolence, you won’t be the only person suffering at the Dursleys,” said Jade. “Apparently, Dumbledore wants me to stay there for the rest of my years at Hogwarts. He already told your aunt and uncle, and they seemed very—er—excited.”

“So, you’re going to be staying with me?” said Harry.

“Yep.” Jade and Harry grinned at each other.

Late in the afternoon, the thing that would make Harry truly happy turned up...

“Harry,” said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. “What’s that thing outside your window?”

Jade turned around to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. Harry stood up for a better look and saw that it was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over the air, buffeted this way and that in the train’s slipstream. Harry quickly pulled down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. He brought it carefully inside. The owl dropped its letter onto Harry’s seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig, Harry’s snowy owl, clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval. Crookshanks sat up in his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm’s way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him and Jade. He ripped open the letter, Jade looking over his shoulder, and shouted, “It’s from Sirius!”

“What?” said Ron and Hermione excitedly. “Read it aloud!”

Dear Harry and Jade,

I hope this finds you two before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don’t know whether they’re used owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is some thing I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the rings and the Firebolt—

“Ha!” said Hermione triumphantly. “See! I *told* you it was from him!”

“Yes, but he hadn't jinxed it, had he?” said Ron. “Ouch!” The tiny owl, now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

Crookshanks took the Firebolt order to the Owl office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. The rings I got from my vault, where Lily had placed them when you were born. She had told me that they were to go to her daughter when she was old enough to be responsible for them. Please consider them as thirteen birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle's house, Harry. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly read it aloud:

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"That'll be good enough for Dumbledore!" said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius's letter. "Hang on, there's a P.S..."

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault no longer has a rat.

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly.

"Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry, Hermione, and Jade's surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."

Harry and Jade read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King's Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he, Ron, Jade, and Hermione stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Jade had noticed Uncle Vernon at once, from what Harry had told her from descriptions. He was standing a good distance from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, eyes them suspiciously, and when Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry and, to her complete surprise, Jade in greeting, his worst suspicions seemed confirmed.

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry and Jade as they bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled their trolleys bearing their trunks and Hedwig's cage toward Uncle Vernon.

"So this is your sister?" he said, glaring down at the girl, who returned the glare with more heat. "What's that?" he snarled, staring at the

envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, you've got another--"

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from our godfather."

"Godfather?" sputtered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"

"Yeah, we do," said Jade brightly, smirking. "He was our mom and dad's best friend."

"He's a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of wizard prison and he's on the run. He likes to keep in touch with us, though...keep up with my news...check if I'm happy..."

And, both of them grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon's face, Harry and Jade set toward the station exit for what looked like a much better summer.

Just so you know, I will be creating a sequel to this. It will be for the trio and Jade's fourth year. So, keep your eyes open. :)